



*Award-Winning Author of  
the Laird for All Time Series*

ANGELINE  
FORTIN

*Something about a  
HIGHLANDER*  
BOOK THREE

*a* SCOT  
*worth* HAVING

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*worth* HAVING

Angeline Fortin

## **Dedication**

*For all the wonderful ladies in my readers group,  
Auld Donell's Book and Whisky Club.  
Your support is invaluable to me! Love you all.*

## Prologue

*Gortlick Manor, Scotland  
April 16, 1746*

“He’s coming *here*?” Cailin MacLeod dropped the towel he’d been using to wipe blood and grime off his face and stared at his uncle in disbelief. “Here to Gortlick? Now? We are to gather at Ruthven in Badenoch two days hence for a general review. The coward ordered as much as he fled the battlefield.”

“Guard yer tongue, lad,” Lord Lovat grumbled around the mouthful of mutton he’d gnawed off the bone. “’Tis the son of our future king ye speak of.”

“Och, ye dinnae believe it will come to that any more than I,” Coll scoffed as he flung his claymore and scabbard on the table. Sitting at the far end of the table, he reached for a platter of meat. The blood shed that day had turned his stomach. The sacrifices made left his innards in such knots he might well cast up his accounts with a single bite. However, his body was in need of sustenance. Weeks...nay, months of following the drum with only the most meager meals had taken its toll on him.

On them all.

This day it hadn’t been only his body that had been weakened. It was his spirit. His faith and confidence that all he had sacrificed for would come to pass.

“I do believe it. I maun,” his uncle countered. “Charles Edward and his men are on their way. Ye will treat him wi’ deference. We will *all* treat him wi’ deference.”

“He disnae deserve our deference, uncle.”

Coll stared down at the leg of mutton then to the pool of red on the platter around it. Pushing it aside, he reached for a glass of whisky instead. He’d sworn his fealty to Prince Charles Edward Stuart. After the skirmish at Falkirk, the future had appeared promising. In the aftermath of today’s defeat? Coll’s confidence in the prince’s ability to lead a nation—much less a rebellion—was shaken.

“It was a debacle right from the start. He kent it. I swear to God he kent it,” he told his uncle. “Do ye ken what he said? ‘Tis nae matter then. We shall meet them and behave like brave fellows.’ One would laugh at the irony if the outcome had no’ been so devastating.”

Downing his whisky in a single swallow, Coll held it aloft for a

waiting servant to refill. He lifted it to his lips once more, then paused to stare down at the amber liquid with some disgust. Not for the quality of the drink but for the needless yet overwhelming loss on the Drum Mossie Muir that day. The carnage haunted him.

“Ye were no’ there to witness it, uncle. He allowed our men to be pummeled by grapeshot and case for nearly twenty minutes by my watch before ordering our advance.” The words tasted of the same acrid bitterness he’d experienced while amidst the fight.

His glass hit the table with a thud, its contents sloshing over the side. The disorder of their troops had been appalling. Their center charged without orders while the MacDonalds to their left would not advance even under direct command.

“In the end, he ran from the battlefield wi’ his tail between his legs. Left behind thousands of men knee deep in the marsh to spill their blood in his name.”

Without spilling a drop of his own. The prince swore he’d fight to the end. That Cumberland would never take him alive. Aye, right. That much was true, at least.

“His gross incompetence is unforgiv—”

Lovat sat back with a slash of his hand to cut Coll off. He picked a chunk of mutton out of his teeth with a scornful look as voices rose in the adjacent hall. “They’ve arrived. Ye’ll be keeping yer thoughts to yerself, lad.”

“Prince Charles Edward Stuart, my laird,” Lovat’s steward announced from the door.

“Yer highness, welcome.” Lovat pushed away from the table and stood with a subtle flick of his hand that compelled Coll to do the same.

Torn between disenchantment and loyalty, he complied with a bow for his aspirant sovereign.

That morning the prince had been prettily turned out. A kilt and coat in the bright red Stuart tartan, his cuffs and collar of purple velvet with gold braid. He’d worn a blue silk sash across his chest and matching bonnet upon his bewigged head. Now, his short blond hair was uncovered, his linen skewed and stained by sweat and dirt. His pale cheeks ruddy. Without his fripperies, he appeared more a lad still wet behind the years than royalty. Every bit the Pretender the royalists christened him.

Charles Edward circled the table to take Lovat’s place at the head. His Irish bootlicker quartermaster John O’Sullivan, who’d served as a colonel in France, headed to the opposite end with four other Irishmen, Robert O’Shea, Sir Thomas Sheridan, Sir John MacDonald, and the Reverend George Kelly close behind. Coll recognized William

Murray, Marquis of Tuilbardine and an Englishman, Francis Strickland, among the others, along with Coll's cousin Alexander MacLeod's man, Edmund Burke, and Aeneas MacDonald, a younger brother of the Laird of Kinlochmoidart and a Paris banker who'd played a prominent role in securing the financing necessary for Charles Edward to launch this catastrophe.

"Lord Lovat, many thanks for your hospitality. We are grateful." The prince's tone carried a pretentious lisp. He immediately contradicted his words by rejecting the whisky offered him and demanding brandy instead. "It is my deepest regret we haven't had a chance to meet before under more fortuitous circumstances."

Lovat grudgingly took a chair next to Coll at the prince's right hand. "Aye, my ill health has kept me from joining yer progress, I'm saddened to say."

Coll rolled his eyes at that. Ill health had nothing to do with it. Joining the prince simply wouldn't have offered his uncle any benefit. Reason enough for Lovat to remain within Gortlick's four walls.

When his drink was delivered, the prince held his goblet aloft to toast his host. "Drink well, my friends. It has been a long day for us indeed."

"Shorter for some." Lovat's glower stilled Coll's tongue.

Charles Edward nodded solemnly and lifted his drink again. "To those valiant men whose lives were cut short this day."

That wasn't to whom Coll had been referring. The prince may not have recognized the slight, but from the way O'Sullivan's eyes narrowed, his quartermaster did. "Yer highness, we should discuss our next course of action."

"Surely the prince will journey to Ruthven where his men await him," Coll said earning a jab in the ribs from his uncle and a low hiss of warning.

O'Sullivan shook his head. "Nay, his safety is paramount. Best he return to France in all haste."

"Nay," Aeneas MacDonald spoke. "We should retreat to the mountains. Pick off the Sassenachs one by one on our own terms."

Coll didn't know MacDonald well, but he liked his thinking. Even while he'd helped drill the Jacobites in the military methods of the English and French, Coll had argued for the same. Use the Highlander's natural skills and familiarity with the terrain to their advantage to defeat their enemy.

"I agree wi' O'Sullivan." Of course, Lovat would agree with the Irishman. On the one hand a staunch Catholic desirous of ousting the Protestant king from the throne, on the other, he'd been granted contracts to supply said crown with mutton and wool. Until he could guarantee his future fortunes, it suited his uncle's private interests to

bundle the prince back to France. "An insurgent campaign cannae be sustained wi'out money and ready supplies."

"Lord Murray suggested stockpiling provisions for such a purpose months ago." Again, a rational point from MacDonald.

"Such defeatism is for the weakhearted," Charles Edward clucked his tongue to dismiss the idea. "We are the righteous hand of God, are we not? He demands we defeat Cumberland and advance into England."

Again torn between his allegiance and grim reality, Coll bit his tongue rather than mention their catastrophic failure in the attempt to execute such a plan that very day. Besides, one did not simply ascribe cowardice to the face of the rightful heir to the throne. Coll may not have been a courtier but he knew that much.

"We would have won the day," the prince continued. "We should have."

"Aye, yer highness, we would have tasted victory today had our cause not been betrayed. There must be a traitor among those who claim to be loyal."

"A traitor," the prince repeated. "Yes. It is the only possible explanation for our defeat."

Coll could think of one or two others.

"Ye need to regroup, sir," O'Sullivan insisted. "Return to France, hold King Louis to his promise to deliver more aid and troops. Then return to fight again when the odds are in yer favor."

As he had over the past months, the prince put more weight behind the Irishman's suggestion than that of his true subjects. The deferential treatment only proved how vulnerable Charles Edward was to flattery and praise. No Highlander with an ounce of pride would toady like this to another, even to a would-be king.

On and on the argument went. Back and forth as they weighed the pros and cons. Not once was there mention of joining the rendezvous at Ruthven leaving Coll puzzled as to why. Was the misguided counsel the prince had taken into battle today still influencing his decisions? Was the prince using his troops' movement to disguise his own escape? After witnessing the prince's failure to adequately lead his men that morning, Coll couldn't help but see this as an example of the prince's disloyalty to his steadfast followers.

His shaky conviction in the righteousness of their movement slipped another notch.

The last of the meat was devoured, a bottle of whisky emptied, and a decision made. Prince Charles Edward would abandon his cause in favor of a retreat to France. A messenger would be delivered to King Louis requesting a ship be sent to transport the prince back to France. The rendezvous point would be Arisaig, the same site in

western Scotland on Loch Nan Ceall where the prince had first landed the year before to begin his campaign to win the English crown.

"My nephew will join yer escort." Lovat's unexpected announcement left Coll momentarily speechless.

"My current escort will suffice," the prince insisted.

"Nonsense. Even Burke dinnae ken this land as well as my nephew." Coll opened his mouth to protest but his uncle carried on undaunted. "Cailin MacLeod has been steadfast by yer side this past year, aye? Sworn an oath to serve ye. I ken the lad's devotion to ye would never allow him to rest until ye're seen to safety, yer highness. There's nae one better, nae more loyal a Highlander to accomplish the deed."

"Quite an impassioned recommendation," Charles Edward said after a long silence.

Aye, rather over the top in Coll's opinion. Nicely done to box him in.

Burke, who'd remained silent through it all, spoke up. "Young MacLeod's assistance would be maun appreciated, sir. We could use all the help we can get."

O'Sullivan nodded. "Night has fallen. Best to have someone who knows the area well if we are to travel under cover of darkness. If Burke believes MacLeod can aid our escape, we should accept Lord Lovat's kind offer, yer highness."

"If you believe it best."

"My steward will show ye where to refresh yerselves and provide food for yer journey." Lovat waited until the last of their visitors filed from the room. "Stay wi' him, lad. Make sure he returns to France. It is in our clan's best interest to see him gone."

"Ye mean yer best interests, uncle," Coll spat. Bugger it, he'd experienced the darkest day of his life. There was nothing he wanted more than to return home and shed the cloak of misery that dragged so heavily upon his soul after the events of the past year. "I want nothing to do wi' this."

"Yer allegiance to king, country, and kin demands it," his uncle retorted.

The reminders of loyalty and oaths gnawed in his already unsettled gut. Perchance it was nothing more than a combination of fatigue and grief that currently undermined his fidelity. Even so, today of all days, no avowal was compelling enough to coerce Coll into escorting a suspicious, deranged, and pampered prince to safety while that of so many of his kinsmen remained in question.

No chance.

Not a chance in hell.



# Chapter 1

*Culloden Battlefield  
Present Day*

For the third time in as many minutes, Ginny Hughes's phone rang. And for the third time in as many minutes, she sent it to voicemail. Voicemail she would delete without listening to as she had all the rest. A deluge of recordings containing any or all of the following: name calling, accusations, ultimatums, and a few rhetorical questions to ice the cake.

*What the fuck, Gin! Why did you skip town?*

He should know the answer to that. To get away from him. To find some measure of peace away from a man who'd been promoted from mere asshole to stalker over the past five months. Dealing with her ex-husband had become an uphill, losing battle.

So, what had she done? Traded one battlefield for another. She grimaced at the irony and stared out over Culloden Battlefield. Her most recent stop on her journey toward avoidance—both origin and destination—and the barren wasteland her life had become.

In truth, beyond the vast visitor center, Culloden was little more than that. A field. A broad, flat expanse of grass waving in the wind. For all her close Scottish heritage and the numerous trips her family had taken to Scotland to visit Granny throughout her childhood, they'd never visited the historic site. Perhaps her parents thought three young girls would grow restless without something more engaging or exciting to view. Two out of three might have. Jane and Brontë were not great lovers of history. Ginny would have been the exception. Unfortunately, though she was the baby of the family, her wishes had rarely been catered to.

Now, she couldn't believe she waited so long to visit.

The desolate landscape, almost absent of tourists on a rainy spring morning, roused emotion so powerful she was reluctant to tread on its grounds. Instead, she opted for the path to the right that circled the field instead of forging straight in. The grind and crunch of her footsteps as she followed the graveled trail were the only sounds to break the silence other than the whisper of the wind through the trees and grass.

Farther afield, rows of wide-spaced blue and red flags marked the formations of the Scottish and British troops respectively. It was

difficult to imagine this nothingness as a battlefield with armies assembled, one across from the other. Uniformed figures in red and white to the one side. A motley, mismatched bunch of proud—and yes, arrogant—Scotsmen to the other.

Had they truly thought to win?

According to the exhibits inside the visitor's center, it had only taken an hour for the Jacobites to lose. An hour for the blood of thousands of Highlanders to seep into ground. As slow, measured steps carried her down the path, a solemn chill seeped into her and sadness settled into her chest. It was almost as if the tragedy of the past called through time, a silent cry heard not with the ears but with the heart.

Pain. Loss. Sorrow.

A few steps down the path, a thatched cottage stood alone in the shade of a quartet of squat, rounded trees. According to the marker in the yard, Leanach Cottage, built in the early eighteenth century, was the only remaining example of the common structure of the time. Given its position in relation to the battle, it was thought the cottage might have been used as a field hospital. Despite the academic appeal to learn more, the call of the field beyond cast an undeniable lure.

Ginny circled the cottage. A gust of wind whirled around her, whipping her long hair across her face. She pulled a strand from her mouth and secured the tousled mass with an elastic she kept around her wrist as she continued to the south where the flat moors began to undulate in the rise and fall of random mounds covered with tall grass. Some small, some larger. The trail bent to skirt them and her steps lagged with something akin to dread weighing heavily in her chest. This was hallowed ground beneath her feet. The profundity of all it had experienced, all the blood that had soaked into it...

Pain. Loss. Sorrow. They pressed against her and melded with like emotion that weighed on her already.

Farther down the pathway, a couple stood close together. They were a wonderfully attractive pair, she noted, thankful for a distraction to whisk away an ounce of her sadness. The woman, a willowy redhead, clung to the man's arm as he pointed to one of the many stones that dotted the shorter grass along the pathway. As tall as she was, the man towered over her. Braw, burly, and bonny with black hair tousled by the wind. Had he worn a kilt, he would've embodied any woman's wildest fantasy of the quintessential Scotsman. Even Ginny, for all her shattered ideals, couldn't help but sigh.

Yet, something in the set of his broad shoulders as he bent his head to speak to the woman bespoke grief. Even heartache. Ginny paused on the pathway, unwilling to intrude on the peculiarly mournful moment. A few seconds later, the man lifted his head,

running a hand through his dark hair and down over his face as if surreptitiously wiping away a tear. With a short nod, he nodded to the woman who set a posy of wildflowers at the base of an upright stone.

They moved along the path, but Ginny waited until the couple put some distance between them before she resumed her course and paused where they had moments before. His sorrow lingered there, engulfed her, and became her own.

The rounded, roughhewn stone with the flowers nestled at its base was about half a meter tall and wide and carved with the inscription *Clan Urquhart*. Similar stones were scattered across the vicinity. Wooden, she looked from one to another. *Clan MacKintosh, Clan Donald, Clan MacLean, Clan Frasier.*

Then, *Mixed Clans.*

Across the footpath, a tall stone cairn had been erected. A marker set into the front of it explained their significance.

*The graves of the  
gallant Highlanders  
who fought for  
Scotland & Prince Charlie,  
are marked by the names  
of their clans.*

The mounds in the field weren't natural.

The dead, identified only by the tartan they wore, had been buried in mass graves. Anonymously, along with their fellow clansmen.

Numb, she continued down the trail, pausing to acknowledge each stone and the loss it represented. Toward the center of the battlefield, a bench was inlaid with a gold plate.

*We followed you, prince  
to this ocean of flatness and bullets.*

She pressed her palm against the engraved words as she stared out over the desolate breadth of the Drummossie Moor. She may not have been able to picture the battle, but she swore she heard the cries of war and agony. The clash of swords and roar of guns and cannons. Most assuredly, she sensed the echo of what had been left behind.

Pain. Loss. Sorrow...and anger.

Looking across the field, Ginny saw—or rather, imagined she saw—the ghostly figure of a forlorn, kilted highlander. His lips moved....

*Defeated.*

The word came to her on the wind, filled with anguish.

Haunting anguish, that was what had clung to her since she set foot to path. It hung heavily over the battlefield, tangible as a morning fog.

It had always been the same for her since she was young. Historic

sites roused an empathetic pang in her heart, as if she shared the emotions of people long dead. Patriotic righteousness and triumph during the days she'd worked at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. Defeat and misery at Gettysburg Battlefield. The torment, frustration, and fury in Selma where the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had been met with brutality and bloodshed. Death.

It had taken years for Ginny to realize that not everyone experienced the same vicarious sympathy to the history around them. They didn't experience the same ache in their hearts as she for those who had suffered loss, or pulse-racing excitement for those who'd found victory. She often felt the truth of history called out to her.

If only because she listened.

She'd studied it, taught it, and cherished it for its lessons despite the heartache. Content to never let the past die.

Now, when she wished more than anything for the past—hers in particular—to fade away, she'd been unable to shake away the memories that haunted her.

Culloden had seen blood and tears. Victory on one side and defeat on the other. They were nothing more than a whisper of the past. Gone but for the remembrances of a few.

How she wished she could put her past behind her and simply let it all go.

## Chapter 2

*Home of Violet Graham  
Leith, Scotland*

“Virginia Hughes, oh my blessed Lord!”

GINNY rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a smile as Violet Graham smothered her in a tight embrace. “Hello, Granny.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?” her grandmother asked as she drew back to look into Ginny’s face with a beam of pleasure before squeezing her close again. “I would have picked you up at the airport if I’d known.”

“It’s fine,” she assured the older woman. “I flew into Glasgow anyway. Besides, I didn’t want to trouble you or Brontë.”

Having her older sister assigned to the task would have meant an hour or more with no escape as she was pummeled with unanswerable questions. A couple of months ago Brontë wouldn’t have had a pedestal to stand on, given her own troubled past with relationships. Regrettably, these days her sister had not a mere boyfriend, but a fiancé. Now, there was sure to be a patronizing oration about how lucky she was to have found the “perfect man”—as if that were a real thing—while Ginny failed to do the same. From there, maybe a neat segue into how *someday* Ginny might be as fortunate as she.

The usual standard practice of sisterly superiority. Brontë meant well, but no thanks.

“Even so, you should have called. Everyone deserves a happy face waiting when they finally see themselves freed from a giant metal tube after nine bloody hours of captivity.”

GINNY grinned at that. Her grandmother was notorious in the family for her hatred of flying, which was why they’d come to Scotland to see her so often over the years rather than the other way around.

Violet’s soothing gaze sobered despite Ginny’s fixed smile. Her cool fingers trailed down Ginny’s cheek as a frown furrowed her brow and her lips turned down in a moue. “What is it, dear? You have such sadness in your eyes.”

Immediately Ginny closed them, cursing their betrayal...and her grandmother’s uncanny ability to read her granddaughters’ moods. “I’m fine, Granny. You look great, by the way.”

Her grandmother didn’t take the hint. “You’re not still mourning

that ex of yours, are you? You're better off without him."

"I know." She opened her eyes again and summoned another stalwart smile. "I *know*," she insisted under Violet's dubious stare.

She did know. Life without Luke Jorgenson was a million times better than it had been with him. Problem was, it had taken the humiliation of divorcing him after less than a year of marriage to realize it. No, that wasn't quite right. It had taken less than a month after marrying him for her to realize it, but months more to worm her way out of it. The real problem was in Luke's inability to come to the same conclusion about her. If there was one thing more mortifying than being married and divorced by the age of twenty-three, it was having an ex-husband who refused to accept the finality of it all. In the five months since the divorce was finalized, he added stalker to the list.

He hadn't merely driven her from him and their home. He'd driven her out of an entire country. Hence, her hasty trip to Scotland, the land of her mother's birth. Hence, the plethora of calls and texts that had gone unanswered. She didn't want him to know where she was. Didn't want to share the air she breathed with him ever again.

Unfortunately, in her rush to get away from him, she'd put herself within earshot of her grandmother and the inevitable series of lectures beginning with *I told you so* and *If you had listened to me in the first place* that she would undoubtedly be blessed with in the near future. Granny had been the only one who hadn't been charmed by Luke. The only one who had warned her.

Ginny could only hope that Violet would parse those sermons out over the days and weeks to come rather than heap them all upon her while Ginny stood in the foyer with her backpack at her feet.

All the more justification for her circuitous route between here and the airport. Granny didn't need to know that she'd spent the last four days hiking across the country in an effort to delay this dreaded moment.

"What's keeping ye there, Vi?"

To Ginny's surprise, an aged yet sprightly Scotsman joined them in the entry hall. His age was difficult to pinpoint. The many wrinkles on his face and thinning hair were at odds with his ease of movement and the animated twinkle in his blue eyes. He could have been sixty or an octogenarian like her grandmother.

He caught her hand with an engaging, impish grin. "Och, what have we here? This must be another of yer bonny granddaughters, aye Vi?"

"I am." Ginny gazed down at him as he was a few inches shorter than she, shaking his hand. "And you are?"

Her granny cleared her throat. "This is my...friend, Donell.

Donell, this Virginia.”

*Friend?* Was that a blush on her grandmother’s cheeks? OMG, did Granny have a boyfriend?

“Call me Ginny,” said granddaughter corrected. “How did you two meet?”

Violet hemmed and hawed. “Oh, here and there! We’ve known each other for years.”

“It was autumn of ’75,” Donell countered with a faraway but fond expression. “Bumped into one another quite literally at a conference on sex discrimination at St. Andrews.”

With a slow blink, Violet nodded. “My goodness, that’s right. You convinced me to join the protesters outside Parliament....”

“Where ye walloped some puir bobby’s noggin wi’ yer sign....”

“And you bailed me out of jail,” Violet finished with a nostalgic smile. “I’d almost forgotten about that.”

My God, Ginny thought, they’re finishing each other’s sentences. Granny *did* have a boyfriend. Incredible.

Donell turned his grin upon her. “Yer dear grandmother helped pass the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, ye ken?”

“I never would have been there if it hadn’t been for you,” her granny told him.

“That’s me.” He offered a modest shrug. “Pulling the strings of history.”

“Fascinating.”

Ginny’s droll response hid the fact that she actually did find it fascinating. She’d love to hear more about it, but at that moment, she was dead on her feet from days of walking. Emotionally exhausted from her escape from New York and trek around the Highlands. More than anything she wanted a shower, a hot meal, and a nap. In that order.

“Do you mind if I go up to my room, Granny? I’m pretty tired.”

“Jet lag.” Violet nodded sympathetically. Ginny didn’t correct her assumption. “We can catch up later. Brontë and Tris are away on one of their trips at the moment, so there’ll be plenty of peace and quiet for you.”

Ginny’s phone buzzed in her pocket as if reminding her of the conflict she’d fled from. Yes, that sounded perfect. Kissing her grandmother’s cheek, she hugged her close for a moment. “Thank you, Granny.”

\* \* \*

Peace and quiet lasted about as long as her shower. Ginny was just getting dressed when there was a hard thump against the wall followed by muted conversation. She finished dressing and went down the hall to investigate.

“Just cut the string then. A girl needs to breathe.”

In the next bedroom, her sister stood in the middle of the room with her back to the man behind her. Brontë’s long hair was pulled over one shoulder, but it didn’t begin to cover her curious costume. Or the stays that cinched her waist.

“What are you wearing?”

Her sister’s head popped up, expression shifting from astonishment to joy in the blink of an eye. She ran to Ginny with her arms wide, and with no deceleration, flung her arms around Ginny, momentum carrying them back several feet before they teetered and fell to the floor.

“Oh my God, I’ve missed you!” Her sister’s effusive enthusiasm was lost to laughter as she kissed Ginny’s cheek and smothered her in a hug that rocked from side to side. “What a surprise! Why didn’t you text me and tell me you were coming to visit?”

Maybe because the last time Ginny had seen her sister was when Brontë had come to New York to be a bridesmaid at her wedding to Luke. No embarrassment there. Brontë had been living in London at the time prior to moving to Edinburgh to stay with their grandmother after an accident the previous year that had left Granny confined to a wheelchair with casts on both legs.

Back then, Brontë’s life had been as bleak as Ginny’s in many ways. With nothing good to report on either end, they’d hardly texted at all until recently, much less visited.

Brontë’s demeanor expressed none of the despondency her texts once had, a tenor that changed a few months ago when, out of the blue, she announced her engagement to a man the rest of the family had never even heard a whisper about. In person, she exuded enviable bliss encompassed by an aura of contentment her former boyfriends had never been able summon. Laughing in a way that seemed to come from the inside and radiate outward, she climbed to her feet and helped Ginny up.

“What are you doing here? Don’t you have classes to teach?”

The presence of another person in the room unbalanced Ginny sufficiently to send whatever excuse she was considering spiraling into oblivion. If *this* was the reason for her sister’s happiness, she could completely understand the rapid progression of their relationship. He was gorgeous. Beyond gorgeous.

“Oh! Ginny, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Tristram MacKintosh.” Ginny cast Brontë a curious glance as her perky tone shifted to one of peculiar formality. A quick look only. She turned back to the handsome man as her sister continued, “Tris, this is my younger sister, Ms. Virginia Hughes.”

As Violet had, Brontë kindly dismissed the Mrs. and the Jorgenson



that had been fleetingly attached to her. Ginny offered her hand. To her surprise, he didn't shake it. Rather he engulfed it between his in a far warmer welcome. He topped it with a slight bow over their clasped hands that should have come across as pretentious but suited him perfectly.

"Ms. Hughes, I am delighted to make yer acquaintance at last. Brontë has told me many stories about ye." He punctuated it all with a smile that reached all the way to his muted green eyes and made her believe he *was* actually delighted to meet her. Not a mere platitude, but sincerity.

"And I am equally delighted to make yours," she responded, realizing it was the truth.

There was something rather delightful in knowing there was an honest to God man out there who could bring such happiness to a woman, her sister most especially. When their eyes met, however brief, the look conveyed intimacy and affection. Envy wrapped its ugly little fist around Ginny's heart for an instant before she kicked it to the curb. Curious and skeptical of the haste of the couple's courtship prior to her arrival, she now found herself thrilled for Brontë.

She also found herself eager for her sister's lecture on relationships so long as it came with the assurance that the good fortune that had befallen Brontë would soon come her way.

She'd be ecstatic to be so lucky at love for a change. If this wonderfully tall, dark, and handsome Scot and the equally impressive one she'd seen at the battlefield were any indication, there might be a man worth having in Scotland.

What were the odds of finding one?

"I don't know what you've heard about me from Brontë, but I have to say, I haven't heard anything about you yet," Ginny said.

Tris grinned and crooked his arm in Ginny's direction. "We'll have to remedy that straightaway. I would also be interested in hearing yer perspective as a teacher on the modern school room. First, may I ask after yer journey? I hope it was without incident."

She cast Brontë an inquisitive look, but her sister only gazed upon him with dazed adoration. "I'd rather talk about yours. Granny said you were travelling. To where? A renaissance festival?"

Her sister was bound in tight, rigid stays over a loose blouse with a drawstring neckline and billowing sleeves. Her bottom half was covered by a full, floor length tartan skirt, the rich blue wool plaid crossed with lines of black, red, and green. A black bodice and cloak were tossed across the foot of the bed. Tris was clad in dark green knee breeches and a matching wool coat with bright gold buttons, and stockings as white as the folds of the cravat peeking out from the

neckline of a black waistcoat. While the exceedingly retro style sat ill on Brontë's shoulders, Tris seemed oddly at ease with the formality.

Having been a costumed historical interpreter—aka tour guide—at Colonial Williamsburg once upon a time, Ginny could place the period clothing with pretty fair accuracy to the pre-revolutionary era of the mid-1700s. Not the sort of stuff one wore around the house.

Or around the century.

“Seriously, why are you dressed like that?”

Brontë crossed her arms over her compressed bosom with a blatantly guilty look. “Don’t tell Granny.”

As good as a confession that something was up. It was an unspoken fact in the family that Brontë loved Granny perhaps more than she did their parents, and vice versa. The pair had their little secrets for as long as Ginny could remember, but never from each other.

Her eyes widened even more when out of the corner of her eye she saw Tris sweep a small pile of coins on the dresser into the top drawer out of the corner of her eye.

Along with—a handgun? Something that was pretty damned illegal in Scotland.

“Is that a gun? What the hell, Brontë?”

Brontë closed the door with a hiss. “Shush, Granny doesn’t know we’re back yet.”

“Wow, that bad, huh? What have you gotten yourself into?”

Though her sister looked awash with guilt, Tris merely chuckled under his breath and pressed a kiss to Brontë’s temple. “Ye’ve always been a terrible liar, lass.”

“I’m an excellent liar!” Brontë protested.

“No, you’re not,” Ginny and Tris responded at the same time.

Still smiling, Tris opened another drawer and pulled out some clothing, then retrieved a shirt from the wardrobe. “Ye might as well tell her, lass. Meanwhile, I’m going to change and then fetch some refreshments for us all. I have a feeling we’ll be needing some fortification, aye?” He paused by the door and executed a bow in Ginny’s direction. “A pleasure, Ms. Hughes.”

“Please, call me Ginny.”

“And ye must call me Tris. I’ll return shortly.”

When the door closed behind him, silence rang through the room. Ginny wanted to pelt her sister with questions about what she was hiding, but she was more curious about Tris. His demeanor and the formal cadence of his speech were charming, but completely abnormal. And his reference to the modern school room?

“Where did you find him?” Ginny asked as she plopped down on the end of the bed. “Don’t tell me at the local pub. I won’t believe

you.”

“Why not? Tris loves a good pint.”

“There isn’t a Scotsman born who doesn’t, I’d wager. That’s not the point. There’s no way you just happened to stumble upon a guy like that in the wild. He’s so... too...” The words trailed off as she tried to identify exactly what it was that made coming across a man like that at ladies’ night at the local bar or on a dating app an absolute impossibility. “Too polite...” No, that wasn’t it. Plenty of people were polite. Rare, but still. “Courteous? No, proper. That’s it. Proper.”

Brontë offered a slight wince at the word, though her expression lit with a different sort of mischief. “I can assure you, Tris is not at all proper.”

“Come on. You know what I’m talking about. That formality? That polish? It’s not normal.”

“He’s working on it.”

“Why would he have to work on it?” she pressed. “I know there’s something you’re not telling me. Spill.” Ginny’s phone rang just then. “Shit.”

She pulled the phone from the rear pocket of her denims and rejected the call without looking at it. As always, the sender had been identified with the apt herald of John Williams’s “Imperial March” from *Star Wars*. She flipped the button to put the phone on vibrate.

“Yikes, who’s so low on your shit list that they were assigned that for a ring tone?” Brontë asked. “Let me guess. Luke?”

“No, you’re not getting out of it that easy. We were talking about you. What’s going on?”

“Why don’t you block him? Or at least turn off your phone?”

There was no way she was going explain. Leaving her phone powered on left her subject to Luke’s incessant calls, true. But it also kept her apprised of his movements. Better to have fair warning than to be left in the dark. Telling her sister that would only lead to more questions.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what’s going on here first,” she lied.

Gnawing her lower lip, Brontë only turned her back to Ginny. “Can you untie this for me, please? Tris couldn’t get the knot out.”

“Fine, I’ll unknot. You talk.”

“Hey, who’s the older sister here?”

“Brontë!”

“Alright, but you’re never going to believe me.”

Ten minutes later, Ginny stared down at the flat oval object her sister offered up as testament of her outlandish explanation. Not a button or dial to mar its surface, it looked harmless enough. Under her fingertips, the white ceramic was smooth. With a touch, however, a bright neon blue circle appeared with the current date and time below

it right down to the second. It counted them off for about ten seconds before the lights faded away.

“That’s ludicrous.”

If Brontë were to be believed, this device somehow opened a microscopic quantum portal through time. Through *time*! She’d traveled into the past numerous times, met their great-great-grandparents, saved their lives, and met Tris in the process before bringing him home with her. Not only that, Brontë and Tris planned to continue traveling back and forth between their two times, living two lives simultaneously.

“Didn’t I say you wouldn’t believe me?” Brontë grinned in a blasé manner that said it didn’t matter one whit what Ginny believed. That was her story and she was sticking to it.

Thing was, the time travel portion of her explanation in and of itself wasn’t what Ginny found preposterous. Fantastical, maybe. A stretch of the imagination, certainly. But she possessed imagination enough to believe many things existed in the world that she hadn’t seen for herself. The presence of such an unusual person in her sister’s bedroom nailed that reality home for her.

No, what confounded her most was the notion that Brontë somehow managed to stumble upon the perfect man in the process. Just like that. Even time travel couldn’t explain that sort of karmic, convenient good fortune.

Honestly, it wasn’t doubt or disbelief that kept Ginny agog at the miraculous device in her hands. It was envy that engulfed her, pure and simple. A different sort than she’d experienced earlier upon meeting her sister’s new beau or even for that cosmic good luck in finding him to begin with.

It was something stronger. Greener.

“What was it like?” The question emerged in a fragile whisper.

Brontë frowned. “Which part?”

“Being in another time.”

Being a witness to history. Not through books or documentaries or revisionist movies but to be granted every true history lover’s heartfelt wish to view it in the first person. To explore it with all five senses. See with her own eyes the color, the movement. Hear the voices, the bustle of life in action. To smell it. Taste it. Touch it. Weigh it like a tangible object in her hands.

*To live it.*

Damn, but she envied her sister *that* more than anything else.

“I have pictures,” her sister offered. “I’ve been dying to show them to someone.”

“I’d love to see them.”

Knowing there was the possibility of so much more, though...

Ginny knew pictures wouldn't be enough.

## Chapter 3

*Culloden Battlefield*  
*April 16, 1746*

She should have been content with the photos.

Ginny crouched behind a low cluster of trees on the western sidelines of the Drum Mossie Moor, hiding her face in her hands to block out the sight of the carnage taking place not far away. Even knowing the details of the battle—the outcome—she hadn't been able to stifle her enthusiasm for the underdog.

At first, she'd been awed by the sight. Against the green backslash of the Highlands in spring, the Jacobite army was a colorful array of blue, green, and red clan tartans. Regimental banners flew from raised standards. The beat of the drum and hail of the bagpipes called out to her heartstrings and plucked them at will. Cannons fired to summon the Highlanders to the front line as a blur of redcoats appeared miles off on the eastern horizon. A rousing battle cry rose as they galvanized themselves for the coming conflict.

It stirred in her a deep-seated patriotism she'd never experienced before, something facts on paper or portrayed on film had never before provoked. This was history. *Her* history. These, her ancestors. Against all odds, she longed for the chronicles of time to be magically rewritten in their favor.

Sadly, it hadn't taken long to realize the reveille was meant to recall thousands of exhausted and famished Scotsmen who were foraging for food or to awaken the many who were still asleep. They assembled, five thousand strong according to the history books she'd read. Even without the more than two thousand Jacobite soldiers who were absent, many deserting their clansmen at the last hour, they looked so impressive to Ginny. Insurmountable.

Until an army nine thousand strong stood against them.

History books aside, even a fool could see that that Jacobite leadership didn't stand a chance in hell. Their position on the boggy moor—historians could argue whether it was chosen or not—offered them no strategic advantage and would, in fact, be impossible to defend despite their substantial armament. Even so, they bravely stood their ground to do precisely that, waited there in precise regimental formation for their enemy to come to them. It took almost two hours for the advancing troops to cover the miles between them

and take position across the battlefield.

In that time, enthusiasm clearly lagged. Fatigue set in. Ginny's rose-colored glasses fogged over. As inspiring as they were, it came down to a numbers game. The English had twice the foot soldiers. The oncoming cavalry outnumbered the Scots mounted soldiers at a ratio of at least five to one. And as each side made its opening salvo of cannon fire, it was obvious how inexperienced the Jacobite gunners were with heavy artillery. Their aim rendered their broadside feeble when compared to the accuracy of Cumberland's cannoners.

A cannonball on the return volley arched over the front lines and decapitated a mounted soldier among the prince's hussars in the rear. Her stomach turned. No cinematic battle scene could prepare a person for the real thing. She turned her back on the battle but was unable to block out the sounds. The rapid gunfire akin to firecrackers, the repetitive boom of the cannon, the ominous whistle of the cannonballs as they flew through the air. The rallying cries of some Highlanders...

The screams of pain from others.

*We followed you, prince, to this ocean of flatness and bullets.*

Ginny plugged her ears. It was an exercise in futility. As was this battle. It was a massacre accomplished in a mere hour's time. The history books had been right in one thing: However well trained they were to fight in the disciplined manner of the English and French military tactics, the Highlanders never stood a chance. They were outgunned and woefully outnumbered. Still, they carried on heroically while she heard every cry with her heart and soul rather than the rational mind of a scholar.

These poor men would soon find themselves in one of the mass graves marked by nothing more than a clan name. Men of the Hughes clan had fought here and died. Her people. Her ancestors. Such a waste of human life.

Why had she come here? Why had she ever thought this was a good idea?

The answer came to her in a heartbeat.

Because even bearing witness to bloodshed of the past was preferable to encountering her ex in her present. From the beginning, their relationship followed much the same pattern as the battle raging behind her. A few warning shots that had gone unheeded, followed by full-on war. Surrender. Retreat.

The enemy continued to hunt her down. After Luke's barrage of calls and voicemails had come the texts. One after another, despite that fact that she never returned fire, they continued, as relentless as the bullets crossing the moor.

I've called and called. Where the fuck are you?

Sorry, Gin. Come on, give me a call back.

C'mon, babe. You know I love you. I want you back. Let's talk.

U ghosting me? ME? I just wanna talk.

Think you can leave me hanging like this, bitch?

I'm coming over and you better be there!!!

Where are you, Gin?

Where the fuck are you?

Then, an hour later:

Ur in Scotland? What the actual fuck are u doing over there?

U think can run from me?

How he'd found out where she was, Ginny had no idea. Turning off her phone served no benefit. Over the past five months, she'd tried that, tried to block him, change her phone number, and even moved into a new apartment. Somehow, Luke always managed to track her down.

Once a mere annoyance, his concentrated stalking of everything she did, everywhere she went... A running commentary on what she ate, who she saw, who she spoke to...

It had all become so exhausting. She was in desperate need of a break, yet as she sat there at Granny's staring down at that last message, she knew there would be no break, no escape from his relentless pursuit. Nowhere she could run, nowhere to hide.

Except there was.

She thought of her sister's revelations and imagined the past as an easy escape from her present. From the ugly future that awaited her once her ex caught up with her.

So, she'd run again. She'd pilfered Brontë's period clothing, money, and taken that innocuous looking device that contained the miraculous ability to make her most desperate prayer come true.

To take her to the one place Luke could not follow.

As destinations went, Ginny conceded this may not have been the best choice. She'd rashly chosen it solely on the basis of her recent visit to the battlefield. Because it was at the forefront of her mind. True, she'd chosen poorly.

It was saying something that it was still better than the alternative.

Reaching into the plain canvas bag slung across her chest, she curled her fingers around the miracle machine that had brought her here. A simple press of the glowing circle, according to her sister, would return her to the precise time of her departure. God only knew, she didn't want that. Where to go then? There had to be a better place. A better time to hide out in.

The steady bombardment of heavy artillery fire ebbed in favor of that from long rifles. Peeking through the bushes, she saw that the



Highlanders, at least some of them, were advancing on foot to meet the Hanoverians who were already halfway across the breach between them. Amid the gunfire rose the clash and clang of metal against metal. The orderly rank and file of soldiers disintegrated into a melee of close quarters combat. Swords and bayonets lifted skyward, dripping with blood, only to descend again. Two redcoats for each Jacobite soldier. It was a bloodbath.

A lone horn trumpeted...once, twice. A call for the Jacobite retreat. One Highlander after another turned away from the fray and withdrew while others fought on. From her reading, Ginny knew that once the Highlanders were defeated, the Loyalist commander the Duke of Cumberland, who hereafter became known as The Butcher, would order his men to slaughter anyone they captured, even the wounded.

She needed to get out of here.

No, wait....

Ginny froze as one of the Highlanders still locked in combat caught her eye. Towering over his enemies, he mowed down the surrounding redcoats, swinging his claymore like an avenging angel. No man who faced him stood a chance. The only blow he took came from a cowardly attack from behind. A sword came down on his back. Rather than buckle under the blow, he howled with pain and ungodly rage as he spun around to face the threat. His attacker recoiled then turned to run. The Highlander followed him out of the fracas and onto the open moors. The chase brought them closer to Ginny, closer still until the pursuit passed her by.

The redcoat's face contorted with terror and rightly so. The Scotsman closing in on him looked fit to kill.

And incredibly familiar.

"What the actual...?"

It was that guy, the one from her visit to the Culloden battlefield days before...in *her* time. No, Ginny chided herself. That was crazy. He might look exactly the same, but there was no way it was the same man. It was impossible.

Or was it?

Brontë and Tris may not be the only ones moving through time. Did they know?

Curiosity spurred her into action, her pursuit parallel to his path, yet twenty meters or so away. Soon enough the chase took them out of sight of the battle behind them. Encumbered by the long skirts, she couldn't keep up. As the distance between them grew, the gap between him and his quarry narrowed. He reached out to grab his prey when suddenly a bizarre, black chasm opened up on the ground in front of them like a swirling black hole in outer space threatening

to suck them in.

Ginny's reflective cry of warning mixed with another, deeper one from farther away as the redcoat fell into the yawning hole. The kilted Scotsman tried to stop but stumbled into the abyss as well. He was gone.

How? Where?

"Hugh! Hugh!"

Ginny spun around to see a fierce Highlander on horseback bearing down on the spot where the men disappeared. His face was ravaged by disbelief and rage. She had no desire to be the first person he came across. He looked prepared to kill first and ask questions later.

Veering off to the side, she ran deeper into the thicket surrounding the moor and soon found herself lost among the trees. She slowed to a walk to catch her breath. Her mind as frantic as her lungs to process the last few minutes.

It was the same man she'd seen on the battlefield before. It had to be. Doppelgängers aside, there couldn't possibly have been two such beautiful men born to the world. Moreover, that palpable grief she'd witnessed in the man as he stood over the Urquhart memorial had been suspect. Kinship may be at the core of the Scottish way of life, but it would be unusual for even a direct descendant to mourn like that more than two centuries after the fact.

His origins had to be in this time.

Assuming she was right, Ginny had a long list of questions. The *wheres*, *whys*, and *hows* of his travel to the future. The same of his disappearance from here. Where had he gone? The only way to learn the truth was to find him.

But find him where?

The stone clan marker was her clue. *Urquhart*. He had to be one of that clan to be so affected by that headstone. It stood to reason that he would want to be among his clansmen in the dark days to come. Therefore, it followed that if she discovered where they would gather, there was a chance she'd find him.

Idiotic perhaps, but even so, Ginny decided to embrace it as an unexpected adventure. A project. Better than calling it what it was—evasion. Pursuing a dubious thread of evidence to satisfy her curiosity was still far, far preferable to returning to a time where her ex-husband lived and breathed.

She emerged from the woods into a clearing. A dirt track road ran through it from east to west. Retreating back into the safety of the tree line, she considered her options. The easterly road would lead back in the direction of the battle and its aftermath. She would meet the retreating Highlanders head on and perhaps the enemy horde at their

heels. To the west lay Inverness. If the man were to reappear, where would he go?

The most obvious answer to the question of where an Urquhart would find refuge was Urquhart Castle. She'd passed not far from the castle on the route she'd hiked between Glasgow to Inverness only a few days ago. Problem was, while it was less than twenty miles away on the opposite side of Loch Ness, the walk could take more than six hours by foot. More in these shoes. She winced as a pebble found its way under her heel. Should the man reappear in this time, given his height, he had the stride to outpace her by a significant amount.

Better to get ahead of him than lag farther and farther behind.

Determining that the benefits of a quick car trip south outweighed being subjected to a steady ping of incoming texts, she fished the time travel device from her bag. Brontë had made a few jokes about the risk of traveling into solid objects, and Ginny had little desire for a tree branch through her chest...or a car for that matter. Keeping to the side of the road but well away from the trees, she pushed the button that would return her to her own time. Cloudy skies gave way to the sun in a flash of light. She walked off the nausea that followed as she returned to the visitor center where she'd parked Granny's car.

A half hour later, she pulled into an empty parking lot on hillside above the shore of Loch Ness. Uncertain how long she would have to wait, Ginny exchanged the thin-soled slippers for her sturdier—and warmer—boots. Since a hungry Ginny was also a hangry Ginny, she stuffed a few snacks and a bottle of water in the bag along with her phone (because it was a natural extension of her person and she'd probably go into withdrawal without it, even if it would be useless where she was going) and her small handbag (because, hey, she was from New York and life lessons dictated you just don't leave your purse in the car unattended. Ever). Getting out of the vehicle, she pulled Brontë's wool cloak around her shoulders. In the valley below, the ruin Urquhart Castle had become over the centuries sat cast in long shadows on the lakeshore. Muted by her experience at Culloden, the sight stirred her passion for history anew. What it must have looked like almost two centuries ago!

She couldn't wait to find out.

Couldn't wait to escape this time again. Preferably for greener pastures.

## Chapter 4

*April 16, 1746*

Hell was far colder than Coll had imagined.

If for no other reason than to thumb his nose at Lovat, he should gladly lead the prince right into the warm embrace of a Sassenach stronghold. Coll had only stopped at Gortlick to convey the news of their defeat before returning home to Dunchleach on the Isle of Skye. After so long an absence, he resented this detour. It would serve the wily old fox right if Coll abandoned this cursed endeavor and did precisely that.

The prince had adequate protection without him. Coll's cousin's man, Burke, was as excellent a guide as anyone could hope to have through this region. Charles Edward would make his escape and live to return to the fight. And perhaps find victory enough to bedevil Lovat for the remainder of his days.

Och, bugger it; as alluring as the thought may be, he'd do nothing of the sort.

Even though O'Sullivan continued to spoon-feed adulation and heap assurances upon Prince Charles Edward's head, a powerful weapon he wielded against the royal's greatest weakness. As susceptible to flattery as he was, the prince lapped it up. It was easy to see how the Irishman had become a favorite of the prince. What's more, he catered to the prince's suspicions of betrayal and treachery as if any encouragement on that front was needed.

It would be a long journey to Arisaig if this was the only conversation made along the way. Coll had no pleasantries to spare, to be certain. Nothing but curses upon his uncle's head hovered on his lips.

"We should turn west to Drumnadrochit and find somewhere to take our rest," Strickland suggested. A clergyman among soldiers, he wasn't accustomed to long hours in the saddle. "It has been more than a day since most of us have had more than a few hours of sleep."

Aye. With time enough since leaving Gortlick to reflect on his state of mind, Coll acknowledged that exhaustion and heartache had taken their toll. He was weary to his very bones, awake only by sheer force of will. Too long without rest, without peace of mind, had indeed influenced his reason. His sense of obligation.

He would do what he could to keep the prince out of

Cumberland's savage grip. He must. With enough sleep, his current bitterness over the day's losses would once again be tempered by the dream of an independent Scotland. Mayhap by the time the prince returned to Scotland, he would once again be more willing than he was now to put his life on the line to further the prince's aspirations to put his father on the throne as James III.

Aye, a pipe dream it might be, but he could not give it up yet. Even if this tedious expedition proved to be no more than a thorn in his side.

Not only because of O'Sullivan's verbal worship. As beneficial as it was to move the prince under cover of darkness, that very darkness slowed their southerly progress along the rocky incline above Loch Ness. Descending into the dense wood of the lowlands, they'd been further delayed in fording River Enrick. At this pace, it would be days more before they reached their ultimate destination.

They couldn't stop now.

"We carry on," Burke echoed his thoughts. "We maun travel as far as possible tonight if we're to evade any redcoats searching for us."

"Searching for us here? Bah! They cannae ken which way we've gone," some fool in the dark behind Coll protested. "We could have gone north for all they ken."

Coll snorted at the myopic notion. "Cumberland will have his men scouring the region for ye all, be it north, south, east, or west. He'll be wanting one last feather in his cap to make his triumph this day complete. Mark my words, he'll be dogged in his pursuit."

"MacLeod is right," Burke agreed. "We maun press on, sir."

"At the very least, we should leave these rocky trails behind," O'Sullivan argued. "There may be a smoother road available away if we turn away from the loch."

Aye, smoother and nae doubt well patrolled. Coll shook his head. "We carry on as we are."

"For what reason?" the Irishman protested. "Burke led us to Gortlick using only the best roads without a single encounter along the way."

To the prince's credit, Charles Edward did not join in the argument for an easier path. In fact, now that Coll thought about it, the seemingly pampered royal had made no complaints whatsoever. Perhaps he had more Scots in him than Coll gave him credit for.

Strickland spoke up again. "There is a fair road out of Drumnadrochit to the west. We could head toward Glen Affric and turn south again from there. A bit out of the way, but doable."

"I would not go that way if I were you."

Coll pulled his mount up short, hand on the hilt of his claymore, searching the darkness for the source of that soft feminine warning.

“Who’s there? Show yerself.”

“There’s an English encampment on either end of Drumnadrochit and another in Glen Affric. You’d never make it through.” The warning continued as a dark silhouette melted out of the shadowy depth of the forest. The woman’s hood made her face impossible to make out, as was her figure rendered shapeless by a voluminous cloak. He had only a lilting brogue to judge her by.

“Is there?” Charles Edward spoke first, taking the warning as gospel. “You were quite correct then, MacLeod. Clearly Lovat was correct in his assessment of your knowledge of the area. We should continue on to the south then, as you recommended.”

In truth, Coll had been quite unawares of any such encampment. He frowned at the woman, curious about the source of her information. “Have ye come from Drumnadrochit then? Have ye seen this encampment wi’ yer own eyes?”

“I...um, aye, of course. How else would I be aware of their position?” To Coll’s ears, there was obvious hesitation in her response. He seemed to be the only one who heard it.

The prince bowed in his saddle. “We owe you a debt of gratitude, mistress. Ignorant of such instances of the government presence as we are, we would have surely stumbled upon them.”

“I am happy to be of serv—”

“Sir?” Coll gaped at the prince. “Ye cannae think to place yer confidence in such a convenient warning.”

Hands extended palms up, the woman took a step forward in supplication. “I promise you, my sole intention is to warn you away from any potential danger.”

Because she knew who they were? Because she’d been sent to watch for them? If so, there was much in the way of potential danger afoot. “For what reason would ye assume we would be in any particular jeopardy should we come upon such an encampment?”

He could not see even the tiniest expression on her face. Still, he would have sworn that she rolled her eyes. “Seriously?” There was a pointed wealth of sarcasm in the word. She cleared her throat and regulated her tone back to a soft, soothing brogue. “What I mean is, given the events of the day, it should be obvious that any Highlander would not wish to happen upon royalist troops.”

Was it only him or did her words seem to be carefully chosen? Out of caution? Or deception?

“The events of day?”

“Leave off, MacLeod.” O’Sullivan waved his hand. “Ye have nae reason to treat this lass wi’ such suspicion.”

Charles Edward nodded. “Agreed, such an interrogation is poor thanks for this woman’s cautionary counsel.”

"I assure you, that is all that it was," the woman maintained.

"Sir, ye cannae think to take this woman on her word!" Coll protested again. "Come, do none of ye find it suspect that we've happened to come upon a lone woman in the dead of night...in the middle of nowhere...and are offered unsolicited intelligence on the wisdom of our current course?" He received a chorus of noncommittal murmurs. None of the prince's entourage was willing to challenge his unquestioning acceptance of her appearance. Coll wasn't one to believe in such fortuity without a measure of skepticism. He shared a look with Burke, thankful someone shared his suspicion. "She could be a government agent, aye? Aiming to deliver us right into their hands."

All eyes turned to Charles Edward, awaiting his reaction before daring to exhibit one of their own.

"I would never do such a thing." The woman took another step forward, this time toward the prince. To beseech her greatest champion or to gain a position of advantage? Though her arms remained extended in supplication, there was no way to judge what weaponry remained hidden beneath her cloak. He nudged his mount to block her path and grasped the hilt of his sword. Immediately, she stopped, her hands lifted skyward. "There's no need for that." Her vocal sigh was filled with frustration. "I swear, I only wanted to help."

Burke leaned forward in the saddle to peer down at her. While his tone was kindly, it held curiosity if not suspicion. "It might help to engender our trust, lassie, if ye could explain why ye're out here, presumably alone, so late in the evening."

"I was awaiting my...my cousin at the castle"—she gestured to the south—"to assure myself that he was safe after the defeat at Culloden. I thought I may have missed him, so I've been walking in this direction hoping to come across him."

It was plain as day to Coll that her tale was improvised and without an ounce of premeditation. By claiming to have come from the south, she contradicted her earlier explanation of seeing redcoat brigades to the west. Moreover, the only castle within walking distance was a ruin. Not a word of her account proved credible. It was clear a growing number of the prince's men believed the same.

Only Charles Edward continued to harbor some trust for the woman. "Who is your cousin, mistress? Perhaps we can ease your worries."

"Hugh." Another step closer to the prince despite the fact that Coll lifted his sword several inches out of its sheath. Aye, she'd read her audience and identified her greatest ally. Lowering her hood, she gazed up at the prince. "Hugh Urquhart? Do you know of him, sir?"

Coll's sword slipped from his hand and back into the scabbard with a metallic snap. Know him? Who? At that moment, he knew

nothing. Not even his own name. Not when his next breath might come...

Should it come at all.



## Chapter 5

“Hugh Urquhart?”

It was the kindest one of the bunch who spoke, the one to whom they all seemed to show deference. Not the man set on an interrogation she hadn't anticipated when offering her—yes, unsolicited—warning. In all honesty, Ginny never expected the group of battle-worn Highlanders would question her kindness in warning them off an imminent threat. The entire entourage all had an air of tormented exhaustion and a hint of defeat.

Her heart grieved for them, especially those who could understand that she might have spared them more conflict. Not that *he* would believe her. Even in the faint light of a waning moon, she'd been able to read the skepticism on his face as easily as she'd heard the doubt lacing his words.

Clearly, he was itching to pelt her with questions, perhaps unanswerable ones. Though at the moment, he said nothing at all but rather stared at her with something of a dumbfounded expression.

Did he know Hugh Urquhart? She hoped so. It had proven to be far more work and less excitement than she'd anticipated searching for him.

“I believe she's referring to the Duke of Ross, sir.”

Ginny blinked and stared with some astonishment of her own at the kilted Scotsman who'd ridden to the front of the group. The *Duke* of Ross?

“Ah, yes! Ross.” The kindly one—their leader? Chieftain?—relaxed and smiled. “Quite a world traveler he is. I've met him on several occasions in Louis's court, though I gather he prefers that of Frederick in Prussia. I haven't happened upon him here since my arrival, though I heard he recently returned from the Continent to join our crusade. There, MacLeod, what do you say to that? If she's Ross's clanswoman, ye have no need to fret.”

They all turned to the man still staring down at her, as if awaiting his verdict. As did Ginny. She was confused about the chain of command among them. While not commander-apparent, exoneration from this man, MacLeod, appeared to carry some weight.

He murmured something that sounded like “Kissed by moonlight...”

No, surely that couldn't be right.

“MacLeod?”

“What?” He jerked to attention and scowled once more. “Ross, she said? Och, sir, on the contrary, to say she awaits Ross in this place is a clear indication that she lies.”

“I *what*?” Her head shook of its own accord. “I’m not—”

“Pray, cease yer denial,” MacLeod growled. “If ye were truly kin to the Duke of Ross, lass, ye would ken that yonder castle is the last place he would be. Urquhart Castle lies in ruin.”

Yes, that had come as something of a surprise to Ginny. She’d turned back the hands of time anticipating to find Urquhart restored to its former glory. Quite a disappointment to discover more of the same.

“He’s right,” another of the Scotsmen agreed with the man MacLeod. “If she were kin to Ross, she’d ken he resides at Rosebraugh Castle.”

The man positioned next to their commander drew his sword with menacing speed. “If MacLeod is correct, we could be in eminent danger, sir. We should be away at once lest the redcoats await to ambush us.”

“What? No?” Ginny protested, backing away lest the man consider using the weapon on her. “You’re mistaken.”

Her words were drowned out by the stomping and neighs of the horses as they spun about. “MacLeod, which way?” the leader’s guard hissed.

“What about the woman?”

“Leave her,” the leader, for he was clearly that, commanded.

“Sir, wi’ respect, we cannae leave her behind to tell the Sassenachs which way we’ve gone,” the one called MacLeod argued. “We need to interrogate her, find out what she kens.”

“We hivnae time for that,” someone shouted, if shouting could be achieved at a volume barely above a whisper.

“Then bring her,” the leader ordered. “But mark me, she shall be your responsibility. Burke, lead the way.”

The men kicked their horses into motion, accelerating past her and into the wood to the south. All of them, except one. MacLeod drew his sword and leapt from his horse, the long folds of his kilt flapping around his bare knees. There wasn’t a moment to appreciate the spectacular sight of a true, flesh and blood Highlander. As impressive as he was, even in the dim light she could read the aggression of both body and expression as he strode toward her.

Ginny stumbled back, hands raised to ward him off. As if that would stop him. His size she could defend herself against. *Had* defended herself against during her college years in Pittsburgh and NYC. That claymore though...How did a girl work around that?

“Please, you’ve got it all wrong.” The light brogue and careful

wording she'd employed in effort to gain their trust fell away. "I was only trying to help!"

The words bounced off him with no visible effect. He kept coming. She scrambled back and into a tree with enough force to be spun around and sent dizzily to the ground. Ginny scurried forward on all fours, with each breath she proclaimed her innocence. He made a grab for her and caught her by her cloak, nearly garroting her with the ties before she slipped out of it. The sudden release made him backstep and she took advantage of the moment. Snatching up the long skirts and finding her feet, she ran. He yanked her back by the strap of her bag. Like a seatbelt crossing her chest upon impact, her body stopped while momentum carried the rest of her forward. Arms, legs, and head snapped forward before she fell hard to the ground. Her breath left her body with a *whoosh*.

Stunned, but still highly motivated to move, she rolled over and disentangled herself from the confines of the strap. With his sword pointed toward the ground, he was close enough for her to make a move. Between her skirts and his kilt, a solid knee to the groin—however deserved—was unlikely to be effective, so Ginny rammed the heel of her hand into his nose. He roared in pain and she seized the opportunity.

This time the full force of adrenaline propelled her forward like a rabbit escaping a snare. No pleas for mercy and wasted breath now, she put all her energy into her escape. He was close enough for her to hear his panting breaths. To feel them on the back of her neck. Dodging another tree, she swore she could feel the thump of his heartbeat.

Stars danced before her eyes as she was tackled to ground under the full weight of his body. Her lungs attempted to expand, to recoup the air forced out of her like a damned bellows with zero success. Only when he climbed off her was she able to inhale, and then just barely.

"Ye bloodied my nose, damn ye. I'm tempted to bloody yers in return."

He didn't. Ginny supposed she should be grateful. A blow from him would likely knock her out cold. Instead, he caught her around the waist and heaved her over his shoulder, stealing the air from her body yet again. So concentrated on drawing a decent breath was she, Ginny couldn't even fight him.

He retraced their path back to his horse and finally panic set in. She couldn't let him take her!

"No!" she wheezed and pounded his back with her fists.

Kicking her legs skyward, she slid down his back until he caught her behind the knees and swung her around as if they were dancing a

Jitterbug until she was cradled in his arms.

“Stop fighting me, lass!”

“Seriously?” she screamed in his ear then thought better of it and bit down on it instead.

With a foul curse, he thrust her away from him, but before Ginny could find her footing, snatched her up again. This time, he hefted her under one arm. A stream of profanities filled the air with each step that carried them back to his horse.

His *and* hers.

Ginny swore, twisted, and struck any part of him she could reach. Yanked on his kilt and sank her teeth into the meaty flesh of his thigh with no effect beyond his redoubled efforts to vocalize every obscenity she’d ever heard and a few she hadn’t.

A position such as this had never been addressed in any self-defense class. What sort of man had the strength to even tote a full-grown woman around like this? Not any she knew, that was for sure. Not even Luke. He bent and scooped up her cloak without missing a step. With some ungodly flourish, he somehow managed to spread it on the ground and within seconds, Ginny found herself wrapped up like a burrito. Arms pinned, face down in the mossy forest floor. Her hair falling around her face so she couldn’t see anything.

What was there to see? The triumph on his face as he planted a foot on her ass to keep her there? Lifting her head, she spat out dirt and screamed. Not with fear, but fury.

“Get your fucking foot off of me.”

“Such language, lass.” The words came between ragged breaths. “Hardly ladylike.”

“Let me go and I’ll show you ‘ladylike.’”

“As tempting as that sounds, I hivnae the time to indulge in more of yer pleasantries.”

He lifted her under his arm once more and carried her to his patiently waiting horse. He’d put one foot into the stirrup and it hit her...hard. God, he was going to take her!

And she had no idea where.

“No!” She struggled anew as he mounted and threw her across his thighs. “Please, don’t... Wait, my bag! At least, bring my bag. Please!”

Her bag. Her lifeline! If she had it—and the device in it—she could get away from this madman in a heartbeat. He’d never know what happened to her. Blink and she’d be gone.

But if he left it behind...

Ginny left off begging and fought him as much as her bindings would allow. Fought as though her life depended on it.

It did.

As she had before, she kicked her feet up and slid forward down

the side of the horse. MacLeod caught her around the waist and heaved her back up with little effort. The blade of a silver dirk flashed in the moonlight. Even in the gloom of night, she could see the blood that stained the handle.

“Dinnae try that again, lass. Be warned, I have a knife.”

“Yes, I see it,” Ginny grumbled. “Long. Pointy. So, so terrifying.”

“Ye think I willnae use it?”

With a suppressed scream, she flopped back down, her cheek against his bare calf. She turned her head and...

MacLeod kicked his leg away with a curse. “Try that again, lass, and I swear I’ll take ye over my knee and tan yer arse.”

“I’m already there, you soulless son of a bitch.”

## Chapter 6

“This is ridiculous!”

All her pleading, wiggling, and writhing hadn’t put so much as a hitch in his giddyap as he carried her away farther and farther from her only hope for salvation. Without her bag and the device in it, she would be stuck here. Panic bubbled up and Ginny swallowed it back. She needed to think.

“You know, keeping me prisoner in hopes that I’ll either say something to validate your suspicions or exonerate myself is almost as pointless as...oh, say, fighting another battle you had no hope of winning?” Cruel, yes, but she was feeling as merciless as he at the moment. “In both cases, you’ve wasted your time.”

“’Tis nae waste of time to fight for what one believes,” he growled. “Everything I have done, everything I do is in effort to see a Stuart returned to the throne. I have given up everything I have for this endeavor.”

Ginny twisted around and flung her hair to the side so she could see him. “Yea? And how is that working out for you so far?”

“Ye mock me, lass?” He glared down at her. Even in the near dark she could make out the gleam in his eye. “Our cause is a just one. Be it God’s will, we will succeed in the end.”

With a snarl, she slumped over once more. His calf was right there. A juicy piece of meat to sink her teeth into. The threat of his knife didn’t sway her. MacLeod wasn’t going to kill her. If that was his intention, he would have done it already.

What he was going to do in taking her away might be so much worse.

“Inciting violence against a lawful government is a crime. You rebelled against your ordained king; technically that’s treason.” She twisted her own knife further. “Face it, MacLeod, you’re not a patriot, you’re a criminal.”

His jaw clenched tight. “We rebelled against a tyrant who seeks to limit our freedoms and change our way of life.”

This was the national pride Ginny had imagined she’d see prior to the battle. Determination in the rise before the fall. Curious that it lingered in the aftermath. She had to admire his conviction, but she’d be damned if she’d admit as much.

This was not that time.

Right now, she wanted nothing more than to incite his frustration

to match her own. "Even the deepest beliefs are sometimes the wrong ones. You'll lose in the end."

"Hold yer tongue, lass, or I'll..."

"What?" she taunted him. "Skewer me with your pointy knife?"

The low grinding of his teeth joined the crickets in the silence that followed. Good. Of course, with his faith in future success, he hadn't taken her jab of failure seriously. It would serve him right if she told him the whole truth about the future of his precious cause. About how Scotland would be swallowed whole into the belly of Great Britain and wouldn't regain its independence. Even in her time, the vote was still on the table.

She ought to.

Ginny cursed under her breath. Empathy was such a bitch sometimes. Even in the most dire of circumstances, she couldn't kick a guy while he was down.

That didn't mean she'd lie there like a dead fish and let him take her off to God knew where. She had no idea what direction they were going right now. Hanging as she was, her long hair was as good as a blindfold. With her bound hands, she tried to push it aside to no avail.

"Can you at least sit me up?"

"Happily...once I have the answers I need."

It was her turn to do a little teeth grinding. He could keep her draped over that damned horse for hours. Hours of wretched tedium while he asked the same questions over and over as if he expected different answers. She had none to give him. If he hadn't accepted the veracity of her story by now, there was little reason to hope that repetition would change his mind.

"Please? I'm not feeling well."

"Answers first."

She ought to bite him again on principle alone. "I doubt your horse would appreciate it if I vomit on him."

"Nice try, lass."

Had she vocalized her inward scream, no doubt she could summon every redcoat in the region. Ginny weighed the odds that such a move would guarantee her freedom and decided against it. They'd probably consider her as much an enemy as he.

"You know"—she tapped his boots with her bound hands—"these are really nice brogues, I should hate—"

"Cease yer havoring, lass!"

The threat worked. None too happily, MacLeod lifted her like a ragdoll, turned her over, and plopped her down on his lap. Much to her regret, he managed it without stopping the horse negating the opportunity to escape.

"Ye're making this as difficult as possible, ye ken that?"

“With pleasure,” she assured him. “Would you really expect anything less? I have been abducted, after all.”

“Detained for questioning.”

“Ha, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck...”

Ginny let the idiom dangle believing it needed no explanation in any time.

She was wrong, though it took him a full five minutes to admit it.

“Then what?”

“What? Then it’s a duck.” Craning her neck, she scowled at him. “If it looks like an abduction and feels like an abduction, then it’s an abduction, plain and simple. No matter what pretty name you call it.”

A grunt was his only response. Probably because there was no excuse for was he was doing no matter how he tried to justify it and he knew it.

Now that she was upright, Ginny was able to mark their progress. Every now and then, through a break in the trees, she would see the gleam of moonlight on water. The sight heartened her and eased her panic. As long as he stayed on the track road south along Loch Ness, she could find her way back to her bag and her way home. Every mile they traveled would make it more difficult, but still doable. She refused to dwell, at least consciously, on the possibility of someone else finding it first. One problem at a time. Still that subconscious worry compelled her to periodically test the hold he had on her, hoping in vain for a chance to escape. Her best chance, she decided, would come while he slept.

*If he ever slept.*

\* \* \*

This misadventure hadn’t gone at all as Coll planned. He’d intended to ensure Charles Edward’s safety, nothing more. Aye, she’d been right in her peculiar analogy regarding the duck. He *had*, in fact, kidnapped her. Were he not so fatigued, he might have made the correlation without her pointing it out to him. Once done, unfortunately, he knew he couldn’t simply release her. Not yet, at any rate. If she were in league with the government troops, it would serve him well to make certain she was far removed from her contact before he did so.

Prior to that point, curiosity alone as to the source of her intelligence was inducement enough to *detain* her.

What was not was his unwitting reaction to the soft bottom nestled in his lap. His captive was bonny enough in the moonlight to steal his breath and senses. She was shapely, as well. As exhausted as he was, her constant squirming managed to revitalize certain parts of him. The sway of the horse’s steady stride on the flat roads rocked her against him. When they took to rougher terrain, she was pushed



torturously back. He was forced to hold tighter to keep her in place. While he kept his seat with the pressure of his knees, she took to bracing her hands against the pommel and levering herself back into place when the uneven gait set her off balance.

The past year following the prince's drum had been a long one. Though there had been willing women who followed the camp, Coll wasn't one to plow a field cultivated by many others.

Nor was he one to trouble an unwilling woman.

He couldn't bear any more. "Stop fidgeting, lass, or I swear I'll—"

"Yes, I know, you'll have your pointy knife in my back."

Coll grit his teeth. Not his knife.

"I'm feeling rather stabby myself," she informed him with a jaw-popping yawn. "This is definitely not how imagined it when I decided to come back here. I can't wait to go back and make sure none of this ever happens."

Her phrasing was unusual but he gathered her meaning easily enough. He might wish he were capable of the same as well. To undo their meeting would ease many a difficulty.

She fell silent. The long, emotional day combined with the steady sway of the horse and mayhap even his solid support at her back, eventually lulled his captive into slumber. He couldn't blame her. It was long past midnight by the time he caught up with the prince's company and fell in at the rear of the train.

They had hours more to go.

Soon he would mark two full days without rest and respite. The previous night had not been spent saving his energies for the battle on the muir. Instead, along with more than a thousand of his fellow soldiers, he'd embarked on a fourteen-mile march from Culloden House to Nairn in an attempt to ambush the government troops camped there. They'd plotered through bogs and ditches up to the buckles of their brogues in mud, trudged through forests with bats on the hunt overhead. They'd arrived shortly before dawn only to abort the attempt because of the unexpected presence of English ships on the Moray Firth and no ground cover to hide their advance from any lookouts.

They'd had to return to the main encampment at Culloden with the English not far behind. Some of the soldiers napped in ditches and bothies, small shelters that dotted the Highlands for weary travelers to take their rest. As much as he'd longed for the same, Coll hadn't joined them.

He should seize the opportunity now while he could.

While the peaceful quiet of the woodlands around them and the absence of his captive's constant hawing allowed him to achieve a sense of tranquility after what had turned out to be the most turbulent

day of his life thus far, he wasn't able to calm his mind.

What would he do if he possessed the ability to turn back the hands of time?

He'd spent most of the past year drilling the Jacobite soldiers and fighting alongside them at Prestonpans, Stirling, and Falkirk. His resolve to support the cause had been unshakable.

In its foundations, at any rate.

Whatever else compelled men to join their insurrection—be it religion or the belief in the divine right of the Stuart claim to the throne—for Coll the undertaking was anything but spiritual. He fought to right the wrong done to Scotland by the unification of England, Scotland and Ireland under one government, one parliament...one king.

James VII of Scotland and the second of his name to rule England had been removed from the throne under the Union Act of 1707 and replaced by Queen Anne. After her death, the crown hadn't even passed to an Englishman but a Hanoverian, George I. Then the second. The Scots suffered under the taxation and trade regulations of the British crown. Coll, like many others, feared if things continued as they were, his country—all that it was and could be—would be swallowed whole by the empire. In all likelihood, restoring a Stuart king to the throne wouldn't recoup true independence to Scotland at this point, though it might slacken the tight fist of English dominion.

This lass might mock him for it, but he'd sacrificed much to make dream into reality. To see it shattered so thoroughly that day....

It had turned out to be a demoralizing culmination of what had become his life's work.

What if this were the end of it? The day had proven that the prince possessed no inherent aptitude for leadership. Charles Edward's personal dislike for his lieutenant general, Lord George Murray, led the prince to heed the advice of sycophants and Irishmen rather than that of the only man among them with more than an ounce of military experience. Their endless arguments and indecision over the most advantageous site for the coming confrontation had, in the end, left them with no choice but to defend the perilous ground upon which they stood when scouts returned with the news that Cumberland's troops approached.

No advantage of a chosen field upon which to do battle. No prior surveillance of the moor that would have exposed the marsh hollow they would fight in knee deep. No sound strategy. No definitive leadership. Just one calamity after the next.

There had never been a defeat so complete. He still had no idea how many of his clansmen had perished that day. If any survived at all.

Had he the opportunity, would he choose not to dedicate his life to a purpose that had proven to be without merit? As the lass said, a waste of time?

Coll shook his head. Failure and shaken resolve notwithstanding, he knew he would have followed the same path. As he would continue to do all he could to see their own possible hope to safety so they might renew the struggle another day. Whatever the cost.

There wasn't much more he could sacrifice anyway.

Soulless, the lass called him. Given all the terrible things he'd seen and done over the past year—and that day—she may have articulated one of his worst fears. The blood he'd spilt still stained his hands and clothing. The lives he'd cut short tainted his soul. The carnage of the day's battle, the cries of pain, and gasping breaths of the dying had reverberated through his mind all day.

Somehow, his reaction to the warm, womanly curve of her body against his chest metamorphosed from reluctant lust to soothing comfort. He hadn't been aware of how he longed for a warm embrace to provide succor and quiet his troubled mind.

That she should be the one to provide it...

Burke circled back from the head of the line. "We're about to cross River Moriston. I've my own thoughts on the matter, right enough. His highness dinnae approve so he sent me to confer wi' ye."

"He feels we should carry on southward to Invergarry, aye?" Anticipating a warm bed and hearty meal no doubt.

The older man grunted his agreement. "I say we follow the river through Glenmoriston."

The southwesterly path through the river valley would provide for an easier journey to Arisaig when compared to the more mountainous route they'd face if they waited to turn west. It would, however, require them to bed down outside without a meal more substantial than the meager provisions they carried from Gortlick.

"Despite the sacrifice of a feather mattress for the prince, that would be my preference as well." The woman in his arms stirred as he spoke, though she didn't wake. Coll shifted her more comfortably against him.

"I'll break the bad news." Burke shifted in the saddle and nodded toward their captive. "What do ye intend to do about her? Ye cannae think to carry her all the way to Arisaig."

"Nay."

Coll hadn't had his curiosity satisfied as yet, but Burke was right. The grueling pace they needed to maintain would be arduous for a woman, even one such as she. Fleet of foot. Strong of body. Aye, he'd learned that well enough. Her blows while ineffectual in deterring him, had pained him.

“We can leave her between Invermoriston and Dundreggan,” he suggested.

“’Twould be cruel to leave her out in the wilderness to fend for herself, lad.”

“It could mean our heads if we left her in a village where she might find a sympathetic ear.”

Burke scratched his jaw and inclined his to cede the point. “Spirited lass. Bloodied yer nose, did she?”

Coll pinched his bruised nose at the reminder. “Nearly broke it.”

If he wasn’t mistaken, her deliberate strike had been intended to do precisely that.

They kicked their mounts back into motion. The prince and his men were already belly deep in crossing the river. Either Charles Edward was taking their destination into his own hands or Burke must have informed him that they’d need to cross either way.

They would. While River Moriston wasn’t wide nor deep, there was a series of falls along the way to make crossing farther upriver more hazardous. And as Coll recalled, the south bank provided a smoother trail when compared to the steep bank on the north.

He nudged his horse into the water. The irregular movement and splash at their feet roused the lass from her sleep. “You know there’s these things called bridges that make this sort of thing far easier.”

A spurt of reluctant humor at her unusual phrasing struck him. Not that he would let her see it. “Bridges can be patrolled, lass.”

She yawned and arched her back in a feline manner. Abruptly, she straightened. She was far more alert as she glanced around, though there was little to see in the gloom with the forest close on all sides. “Wait, where are we? What river is this?”

Coll traded a look with Burke. “River Moriston.”

She swiveled around to face him. As before, the sight of her in the moonlight nearly struck him dumb. “You aren’t thinking of following it, are you?”

So stupefied was he, he almost failed to register her words. Only the urgency in them caught his attention. And redoubled his suspicion. “Why do ye ask?”

“If you go upriver, you’ll be surrounded by redcoats in a mile.”

Meeting Burke’s eye, Coll jerked his head. With a curt nod, the older man hurried his horse across the water and turned westward.

“Where is Burke going, MacLeod?” O’Sullivan asked.

Coll ignored him and addressed the prince. “Wait here a moment, sir. If ye please.”

“Is there something amiss?”

He passed them by without responding as he didn’t know the answer to that question. His captive could be playing him for a fool or

attempting to misdirect them.

Or be earnest in her warning.

"What are you doing?" she hissed under her breath. "You need to get away from here."

"Haud yer wheesht and let me think."

Coll urged his horse farther along the westerly path, alert to any noise or indication that royalist troops were nearby. There was nothing but the rush of water and occasional hoot of an owl.

"Are you still thinking?"

"Wheesht, lass."

"How about I think for you?" She lifted her bound hands and pointed upriver. "Going that way would be detrimental to your continued good health."

"And ye kent this how?" he muttered irritably. "Have ye also recently passed through Invermoriston and seen these troops wi' yer own eyes?"

"No, but you need to trust me on this."

She turned again to look up at him with wide, pleading eyes. They were so luminous, he was almost inclined to grant her wish. A harsh bark of laughter escaped him at both the folly of believing her and his contrary inclination to do so anyway. "I cannae do that, lass. Trust is the verra last thing I feel for ye."

Her shoulders lifted and fell in a display of exasperation as she turned her back on him once more. "Then I won't bother to tell you to avoid St. Augustus, as well. Since it would do no good to warn you."

She said nothing more. Not even when Burke returned to confirm her claim.

The route south was clear. Prince Charles Edward would get his feather bed, after all.

They continued south with the early hours of the morning upon them. His captive's back was rigid, shoulders square. Still, she said nothing. Burke scouted the route ahead and returned with news that there were two more encampments on either side of River Oich on the southerly end of Loch Ness.

In St. Augustus.

"Have ye naught to say, lass?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," her pert lilt overflowed with ridicule. "I'm currently reveling in a moment of personal satisfaction. Did you say something?"

"Nay and dinnae let me ruin it for ye."

## Chapter 7

Invergarra Castle  
April 17, 1746

“Still here,” Ginny mumbled sleepily under her breath. “Great. Just great, Ginny.”

With a groan, she closed her eyes against the hazy light of day and flopped over onto her back. A full body stretch roused a pained groan. Everything hurt. Everything. The narrow cot that had been her bed for the night wasn’t entirely to blame. *That man* was...

The women in her family were all about that feminist life, and a day ago...shit, eight hours ago she would have argued until she was blue in the face for the right of women to play in professional sporting leagues alongside men. While Luke had laughed at such arguments, he’d never thought to demonstrate so effectively that—while women might have a right to—they may not *want* to. MacLeod was a good-sized man. She’d put him a few inches over six feet and easily well over two hundred pounds. If he could crush her like that, imagine what a three-hundred-pound lineman could do!

No, she’d leave football—the American sort, at any rate—and rugby to the big boys now without argument.

If she ever had the chance.

At least she’d had a tiny moment of payback to balance the scales. Bruised body in exchange for a bruised ego.

Ginny rolled off the cot and climbed to her feet. Stretching this way and that, she circled the room while she combed her fingers through her hair. Ugh, what she wouldn’t do for a toothbrush! With a grimace, she paused at the single window to peer out.

A thorough examination of the window and the deadly vertical expanse of moss-covered stone below it after she’d been confined here upon their arrival had given her little hope of escape. The room offered nothing more than four unadorned stone walls, the wooden cot, and a chamber pot. All she’d been given to eat were a few oatcakes, so she didn’t even have a utensil to wield *a la* Edmund Dantes and The Mad Priest in *The Count of Monte Cristo* in an attempt to carve a block out of the stone walls and tunnel her way to freedom. That hadn’t kept her from spending hours searching for options and stressing over her predicament only to fall asleep, cold and exhausted, long after the sun had risen.

Unlatching the window, she pushed it open. A cool breeze swept over her. She leaned against the sill and relished its soothing caress. Gauzy fog clung to the surface of the loch below and crept up the incline of the verdant hills on the opposite shore. The sky above was gray, sunlight diffused by the clouds casting an aura of enchantment over the landscape. Even top-rated photo filters couldn't produce such a cinematic effect. Ginny sighed with appreciation and involuntarily relaxed a notch.

Scotland may not have lived up to her expectations regarding its living history, but it continued to astound her when it came to sights and sounds.

Ginny spun around when a key ground in the lock of the door and swallowed her gasp of surprise as she got her first look at her captor in the light of day.

Scotland also lived up to her wild expectations of gorgeous men. Expelling a shaky breath, she sought to calm the riotous cadence of her heartbeat. MacLeod wasn't dark-haired as Tris MacKintosh or Hugh Urquhart. That didn't mean he wasn't as devilishly handsome. Thick brows slashed over light brown eyes. Several days' growth of whiskers softened his squared jaw and the hard planes and sharp angles of his divinely sculpted features. He had shaggy light, brown hair that begged to be run through her fingers. He must have spent plenty of time in the sun to bring out highlights of ashy blond.

Tall and broad, from what she could tell, the rest of him was just as well-sculpted. The long folds of his kilt were belted around narrow hips. The open collar of his linen shirt displayed defined lines of muscle.

If there were a dating app for time travel, her review for mid-eighteenth-century Scotland would read: Five stars. Would recommend for scenic views of multiple varieties. Beware of ruffians, may have unexpected undertones of gentlemanly behavior.

*Yea, right. Let's not forget he ran you to the ground and carried you around like a rag doll.*

True. There was that whole kidnapping thing to consider, too. On the other hand, he'd also exhibited an astonishing degree of devotion to his homeland. Admirable, even if it was at her expense. Beyond that full body slam to the ground, he hadn't hurt her or tortured her with anything more than incessant questions despite a situation that might have called for it. In retrospect, she could see why he might have been a teeny tiny bit wary of trusting a random woman on the side of the road. Even so, he'd held her when she'd slept and carried her like a baby up to this tower room after she'd stumbled on the bottom step despite his own visible exhaustion. Who did that with a prisoner?

More to the point, who *could* do that? She hadn't counted but it

had been a lot of stairs.

Had she come across him at any other time and under different circumstances, Ginny might have embraced the moment as one of providence. A man like him would make any sane woman's senses take a permanent vacation. While she often leapt into the fire without thinking, Ginny wasn't crazy.

Besides, he looked about as approachable as a grizzly bear just out of hibernation.

And at this point, she wanted nothing more than to get away from him.

But how?

Her answers, given honestly—or as honestly as possible—could not change. There was nothing she could alter to suit him and regain her freedom.

“Good, ye're awake,” was all the greeting she received.

Ginny dropped an exaggerated curtsey. “Good morning to you, as well, sir.”

Did his lips twitch? No, that was definitely a frown. “It shall be a good one should ye decide to answer my questions.”

“A-a-and here we go again,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Ye talk to yerself, lass?”

Ginny shrugged and turned back to the window. “Don't you?”

“I dinnae ask questions I dinnae expect to be answered.”

She shot him a mocking look over her shoulder. “We both know that's not true.”

This time his lips definitely twitched, though his amusement faded fast. “I expect that to change. Will ye give the answers to my questions freely or shall we continue our interrogation?”

“What? No breakfast first?”

Was that an eye roll? Inwardly, she berated herself. One of the most desperate situations of her life and she was trying to make him smile? Really?

Her mental self shrugged. He probably had a great smile, should he ever use it.

*Irrelevant to the situation at hand, Ginny!*

MacLeod turned and nodded to the burly, older man by the door who disappeared, leaving them alone. Priorities back at the forefront of her mind, Ginny eyed the open door with a surge of hope. Her captor stood before it, feet braced apart, arms crossed over his broad chest. A barrier as effective as any door.

That needed to change.

Ginny turned away from the window and paced unhurriedly along the perimeter of the small room. “May I ask where we are?”

“I have questions of my own that remain unanswered, lass.”



“Yes, I’m sure they kept you up all night.”

He grunted in agreement, rubbing the back of his neck. She circled closer to him, elated when he mirrored her motion and skirted the room opposite her. “This is Invergarry Castle, seat of the MacDonalds of Glengarry.”

Then that was Loch Oich out the window, Ginny realized. They’d come farther south than she’d thought. On foot, it would be at least an eight hour walk back to her bag north of Urquhart Castle. Assuming it was still there.

“A safe haven for a night’s rest as our host Lord MacDonald is a member of the Prince’s Council.” He reached the window and gestured out. Unfortunately, he did not turn his back on her fully as she to look out. “This castle sits on a site called *Creagan an Fhithich*. The Raven’s Rock. My grandfather used to tell me stories of the bloody battles between the Scots and Sassenachs for the control of the Highland strongholds.”

“Hmmm, is that so?”

“Aye. ’Tis a position of strategic importance, aye? ’Tis changed hands many a time. Held by the Sassenachs during the reign of William and Mary following the unification. Reclaimed by the first Jacobite rebellion in 1715 only to be lost again. Only recently have the royalists been expelled once more.”

Now he did turn to look out, giving her opportunity to slip closer to the door. She weighed her chances of escape.

“Urquhart Castle, on the other hand,” he continued, catching her complete attention for a moment, “was purposefully demolished in 1692 to keep it out of English hands. I gather its history isnae commonly known in the Colonies?”

Ginny froze in her tracks as he glanced at her over his shoulder. “No, it is not.”

Finding the current version of Urquhart Castle in ruins had certainly been an unexpected...and unpleasant surprise. She’d sat upon the crumbled walls for hours while drinking in the splendor of the landscape, the silence and serenity after the horror of that morning’s battle. And the discord of her own life. The sun set and hours passed without some mystical intervention to guide her path, so she’d taken the northern road to clear her head and consider her next move.

She hadn’t wanted to return to her time.

She hadn’t realized there were more unpleasant options.

“It’s beautiful here.” She shifted her gaze to the window in hopes that he would follow her example and allow her the opportunity to flee out the open door. There had to be a way out of this mess.

“Ye willnae be staying. We’ll leave before nightfall.”

For a moment, all thoughts of running fled. All conscious thought in general beyond the words that rang hollowly in her ears. He had no plans to free her or even leave her here. Rather, he intended to put more miles still between Ginny and the place she wanted to be. She might think he was cute and find him mildly likeable but not enough to stay here and be hauled farther and farther away from her only means of returning to the twenty-first century. She couldn't let that happen, but what more could she do to convince him she was no threat? Begging hadn't worked.

Running...

That door looked more appealing than ever. Ginny was about to take her chances when the stocky guard reappeared to bar the portal. His presence was as daunting as MacLeod's, though for reasons at the far end of the spectrum. He was probably close to her father's size and age, mid-fifties or so, with a full beard and chaotic head of hair as steely as his grey eyes. He had what could only be described as a perma-scowl. Shaggy salt-and pepper brows knitted into the deep vertical furrows of his forehead. His thick arms were crossed over a barrel-like chest. In another time, he would have made a great bouncer at a Highlander-themed nightclub.

No other option immediately presented itself, so she took the tray he offered. "Thank you."

"Burke, mum. Edmund Burke." His low grumble was the perfect complement to his appearance.

"Thank you, Mr. Burke."

She carried the tray back to the cot and sat, placing it next to her rather than keeping it on her lap in case fate dealt her a chance to flee. Smoked salmon and more of the same oatcakes she'd had the previous night along with a tankard of what smelled like ale.

*Mmm, breakfast of champions.* Ginny managed to keep the modern phrase to herself.

Knowing she would need energy to either run or walk back to her bag, she took a bite of the salmon and scoured her mind for options. Walking would be preferable, so she had to try again. To convince him. To gain his trust.

"Listen, we started off on the wrong foot, you and I," she changed tactics. The salmon was heavily smoked. She quickly washed it back with the ale. "You misread the situation entirely, I swear it. I would never tell anyone where you've gone. There is no one to tell. And I was looking for Hugh Urquhart. That's the truth. I swear it."

The two men shared an inscrutable look. Burke shrugged and turned to go.

"I'll leave ye to it, lad, and see to the horses." He turned to her and touched his brow in a respectful salute. "A pleasure, lassie."

One obstacle down. One to go.

"Each word from your lips only serves to amplify my mistrust." She held MacLeod's arch gaze and was rewarded when he turned away with a shrug. "Ye're expression upon hearing the title Duke of Ross betrayed ye, lass. Ye dinnae ken the duke at all, admit it."

"True, I didn't know his title and I'll admit I'm not his cousin. Everything else I said was true, though. When I saw the castle in ruins, I realized he would not come as I'd hoped, so I followed the road—"

"On foot. Alone."

"Yes. As difficult to believe as it is, it's true," she insisted. "I overheard your conversation about traveling west and thought only to warn you. That's all."

"And how did ye ken there were government troops at Drumnadrochit?"

One of the history books she'd bought at the Culloden gift shop on the aftermath of the battle had included a map of the military encampments. As blood enough had been shed that day, she'd considered it her civic duty to warn them. Some thanks she was getting for her effort! Not that Ginny could admit as much.

"I passed through the village on my way to the castle."

"Such a feeble fabrication is the best ye can manage? How disappointing." He mocked her with a cluck of his tongue. "I maun say, ye're a terrible liar, lass."

She'd always thought she was rather good at it. Apparently, that denial ran in the family.

Look at her now, thinking even the slimmest chance of escape existed.

Denial.

"If no' his clanswoman, why did ye seek out the duke?"

The question wasn't one she'd anticipated. "I...um..."

Ginny had no answer that wouldn't rouse a dozen questions more.

"Are ye his mistress?"

Twisting around once more, she gaped at him. "What? No!"

His brows rose, then he nodded. "I feel that's the first truth ye've offered. Now, let us see if we can continue on that course, shall we?"

MacLeod turned away and leaned out to pull the window closed.

Before he latched it, she was gone.

## Chapter 8

“Bugger it, lass!”

MacLeod’s profanity bounced off the tower walls. Before she made it to the head of the spiraled stairwell, Ginny heard his footfall behind her. What now? She’d been so focused on where to go and what to do should she escape the castle, she failed to consider how to triumph in the escape itself. Fleeing her prison would not guarantee freedom. As Hugh Urquhart—yes, she was still certain it was the same man—had proven in his pursuit of the redcoat from the battlefield at Culloden and MacLeod had demonstrated the previous night, in these long skirts, she could be easily outpaced.

He’d done it once, he could do it again.

He held the bonus card of knowing the location of the nearest exit.

“Get back here!”

As if.

Round and round she went down the steps, skirts bundled under one arm. With her other hand, she clung to the tight curve of the inner wall using it as a pivot point to build momentum as she rotated ever downward.

Damn, the stairs were steep! And narrow. She’d be lucky if she didn’t miss one and either break a leg or crack her head against the stone wall. Luckier still if MacLeod didn’t catch her before then. Down three rotations...four.

Damn, he’d carried her a long way up. She was impressed. Infuriated with him but impressed. Would he do it again if he caught her? Haul her up the stairs, to that tower room, and throw her on the bed...

*Geez, Gin. Really not the time!*

Five. Six. Only beams of muted sunlight through the arrow slits lit the way. She was getting dizzy by the time she somehow reached the bottom, intact and untouched. With no opportunity to determine the quickest route to freedom, she dashed out of the stair tower—

And into an expansive room paneled in dark wood. A group of men gathered around a long wooden table in front of a massive fireplace at one end of the room. Every one of them fell silent and turned to stare. Body torn between shock and desperation, she swerved and stumbled toward the largest of the three doors along the near wall.

“MacLeod, what is this?”

“One moment, sir.”

He was right behind her!

Ginny screeched out her frustration as MacLeod caught her around the waist and lifted her off her feet. She rammed her elbow in his stomach and threw back her head hoping to succeed where she’d failed the previous night to break the bastard’s nose. “Would you please stop manhandling me!”

“Enough, lass,” he growled in her ear. His arms tightened like bands of steel, pinning her to him. “Dinnae think of running again. There is nowhere ye can go that I wouldnae find ye.”

“I’d take that bet,” she muttered under her breath.

“Bring her to me, MacLeod.”

His big body tensed but he did as commanded and half-carried, half-dragged her across the room. Ginny gave up the fight halfway there. She knew when she was outnumbered. Besides, the commander of the party from the previous night was there, seated at the head of the table though angled to the side with his legs crossed, looking freshly bathed. He’d shown some kindness before. She wouldn’t even envy him his bath if he did so again.

“My apologies, yer highness.”

MacLeod bowed without releasing his iron grip on her wrist. In that moment, he didn’t need to hold Ginny to keep her there. His revelation held her captive.

*Highness?*

While he wore knee breeches rather than a kilt, in the light of day she recognized the iconic red plaid of his long jacket and stockings. The Royal Stuart tartan. That was the only recognizable feature. He wasn’t as pale or rosy-lipped as portrayed in paintings or tins of Scottish shortbread. Not quite as effeminate. His features were a tad more defined. Eyes wide set, but not bulging. Lips less pursed and thinner than the portraits of the era leaned toward. That wasn’t to say that his overall appearance wasn’t more—what was the right word?—doughy?—than that of the men around him. The results of a pampered life.

A royal life.

Ho-ly *shit*!

“Oh my God, you’re Bonny Prince Charlie.”

\* \* \*

Charles Edward chuckled merrily, clearly pleased to have dazzled the woman. Or more to the point, to have dazzled such a bonny woman.

As it had the previous night, Coll’s first glimpse of her this morning had stolen his breath away. He wasn’t certain what he

expected when unlocking her chamber door. A direct assault perhaps, an attack from behind the door. Most assuredly another tongue lashing. Much to his surprise, he was welcomed by the serene tableau of her framed by the window. The sight was so enchanting he'd managed only the most meager of greetings.

In the light of day, she was more striking than she'd been in the moonlight. Not conventionally beautiful in the manner of the ladies at the French courts where towering, powdered wigs, liberal cosmetics, and padded bodices or hips could reshape even the most plain lass to genteel standards. Such artifice didn't appeal to him. Without any of them, Ginny was lovely enough to steal a man's breath. Hers was an earthy beauty. The sweet curve of her jaw and prominent cheekbones. Freckles that danced across her nose. Her skin was kissed by the sun rather than powdered to an unhealthy pallor. Thick chestnut curls spilled across her shoulders, gleaming in the soft light. No primping was needed to make a man's fingers itch to be buried among them. Thick, black eyelashes surrounded eyes of the most unusual, enchanting shade of periwinkle.

They widened upon his appearance and swept down the length of him in a manner that might have flattered if they had not promptly narrowed with a challenging light.

No readiness to answer the questions that, aye, had kept him awake for hours after their arrival at Invergarry when fatigue of body and mind demanded he sleep. No much-deserved thanks for incarcerating her in the tower room rather than the castle dungeon. Not that he would have; he wasn't so great a monster to imprison a woman in such conditions.

And then she'd run.

Coll supposed he should have expected as much. He may have, had he been clear of mind.

"My apologies, yer highness," he said again.

He waved the apology away without looking away from the woman. "Will you not introduce me to our guest?"

Coll frowned. He should have asked. "I'm afraid I hivnae yet gained that information, sir."

"What have you gained then if not something so simple as a name?" Charles Edward glanced around the table with a chuckle echoed by those around him.

"Virginia Hughes, your highness." She yanked her arm out of Coll's grasp and dropped into a deep, if somewhat clumsy, curtsy. "I am so honored to meet you."

She sounded so utterly sincere, his reservations were once again aroused. Her wool skirt was fashioned of the dark blue, black, and red plaid of the Clan Hughes tartan, he noticed. She was capable of some

truth then.

“Virginia?” The prince tasted the name with a frown. “Like the Virginia colony?”

“No, sir, like the author, Virginia Woolf—” She shook her head and bestowed upon the prince a winsome smile no doubt calculated to ease misgivings and win male hearts. “It is an odd name to be sure. I prefer to be called Ginny, if it pleases you to do so.”

A second smile won the prince over. “Surely it is a most unusual name. Are you from the Colonies then?”

It would make sense, Coll thought. Based on her speech and clan name, it was obvious she was no Sassenach, however he hadn’t been able to place her accent. There was a hint of proper Scots in it. Until she was incensed, when it dissolved into something foreign.

“I am. I’m visiting from New York.” She cast Coll a sidelong glance. “As such, I’ve no reason to take sides in local politics beyond the heartfelt hope that your highness will soon find his way to regain the throne for the Stuarts. I’ve said as much to your man MacLeod here, though he hasn’t yet seen fit to trust my word. Perhaps someone as discerning as you can convince him there is no reason to detain me further?”

The minx. She’d clearly deduced the prince’s weakness and meant to exploit it with her smiles and flattery. Coll ground his teeth. “On the contrary, there are many. First and foremost, her inexplicable intelligence regarding the locations of the English encampments.”

Prince Charles Edward’s smile faded away. “Have you not yet been assured on that front?”

Though he’d spent hours interrogating his prisoner as they rode, Coll remained steadfastly *unassured* by her denial and prevarication. “No’ sufficiently to guarantee yer highness’s safety.”

Or to satisfy his own curiosity.

He didn’t know what to make of her. Ginny. Logic maintained that she must in some manner be in league with their enemy. There was no other reasonable conclusion. Yet despite his continued assertions to the contrary, she had managed to convince Coll that she hadn’t come upon them with the deliberate intent of directing them into government hands.

That didn’t explain the rest. Nor did it mitigate his wariness or mistrust. He couldn’t help but feel that releasing her at this point would be a grave mistake.

The prince narrowed his eyes upon the woman. “Perhaps Miss Hughes will see fit to explain herself to me.”

Ginny shifted from foot to foot and shot Coll a dark scowl. “As I’ve explained to Mr. MacLeod multiple times, while I passing through the village Drumnadrochit yesterday, I stopped at a tavern where some

English officers sat with a map of their locations spread on the table before them."

As Coll had, O'Sullivan sneered at the notion. "And she can recall it in such detail as to be able to place them so readily?"

She nodded, emphatic in her effort to convince them. "Yes, your high—"

Strickland, the pious sop, spoke. "'Tis an farfetched notion, indeed. We cannot trust her, sire. The lass could be a witch for all we know."



## Chapter 9

*Witch.*

Ginny stilled at the word. It wasn't a thing to jest about. She had no desire to be put on trial. No doubt she'd be convicted in a matter of minutes given she possessed many of the traits considered "evidence" in this time. She was female to begin with, stubborn, and bore a birthmark on her hip they would surely see as proof that she'd made a pact with the devil.

A chill ran over her, lifting the hairs of her arms. Being accused of some sort of espionage was one thing, but how did one argue against such a charge?

"I dinnae believe it was witchcraft that lent the lass her knowledge." The unexpected defense came even more unexpectedly from MacLeod. She gaped at him as he stared down at the prince with unwavering conviction. "While she's persisted in crediting her memory for her uncanny recall, I believe there is a far simpler explanation to be had."

"Is there indeed?"

*Indeed?* Ginny repeated the prince's question internally, wondering where MacLeod was going with this.

"Aye, and one cannae blame her for her reluctance in voicing as much aloud. 'Tis a gift oft met by skepticism," he continued. "The lass is a seer."

"A seer?" she echoed.

Inwardly she rolled her eyes at the excuse. Had she been a Scotsman passing them by on that road last night in possession of the information she had, they probably would have accepted it at face value. But because she was a woman, there simply *had* to be another reason. A witch or a seer—what was the fine line that made one okay? Either way, the patriarchy was alive and well in 1746.

She jumped under MacLeod's pointed stare. "Yes, a seer."

The prince's—she couldn't get over it, Bonny Prince Charlie!—superficial artlessness was belied by the sharp perception in his eyes. He was no fool for all his foppish air. He'd expect some proof before he accepted such a fanciful explanation. Marks on a map wouldn't be enough.

As she possessed a certain degree of foreknowledge, it shouldn't be too difficult to convince him. His religious fervor would be a good place to begin.

“I know it is God’s divine will that has brought me to you, to assure that your safety is guaranteed.”

Her thoughts scrambled and Ginny struggled to organize what she’d read about and seen to best validate her supposed talent. Nothing past would do. That he’d never been to Scotland before arriving at Glenfinnan in August of the previous year, that his mother was Polish, or that he’d been raised in Italy might be common knowledge. It had to be something relevant to this moment of his life.

She dropped to her knees before him and stared up at him in earnest. “Your highness left your targe at the battlefield at Culloden yesterday.”

“He disnae carry one now. ’Tis a simple deduction to reach,” one of the men said.

Ginny ignored him and continued. “It is decorated with cast silver emblems depicting shields and weaponry around the perimeter with the head of Medusa at the center.”

“Sire, you’ve been on parade and appeared in Edinburgh time and again,” another of the men argued. “Anyone could have noted the styling, even from a distance.”

“You did not carry it during the battle.” She shot the naysayer a cutting glance. “You left behind with your other belongings in the baggage train, isn’t that so?”

Prince Charlie drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair thoughtfully and nodded.

“It was recovered by one of your clan chiefs, Ewan MacPherson of Cluny,” she told him. “A simple fact to verify.”

She peered up at MacLeod. He looked somewhat taken aback by her revelation, but also offered a discreet incline of his head. Not that she needed his approval!

“I suppose he has the prince’s sword, as well?” The pinch-faced man seated at the prince’s side was not as overawed by her “sight.” “This is no proof, sire.”

“You mean the sword with the crouching lion of the wrist guard and the pommel of an owl?” she retorted. “The one with the blade engraved with the words *Draw me not without reason* on one side and *Sheath me not without honour* on the other? In French? I’d have to be close indeed to have seen that on parade.”

“And where is my sword now, Miss Hughes?” the prince asked her.

“I’m sorry to say it was retrieved after the battle and presented to the Duke of Cumberland, your highness.” The pins and needles that had kept her tense and on edge throughout all this began to fade. He believed her, she could see it, and his was the only opinion that counted. “I would suggest you warn your men to beware of

Cumberland, sir. He has ordered that no quarter be given to Jacobite supporters or those who harbor them. He will become known as The Butcher in the days and weeks to come for the way his men pillage, rape, and murder those they happen upon.”

“No quarter?” MacLeod repeated with a frown. “Cumberland is a Sassenach duke and a gentleman. Surely, he will comply with the convention of war.”

“I think you will find he does not,” Ginny assured. “The people should be warned.”

The prince nodded. “Will he do the same with me, then?”

There it was. A personal assurance she could supply.

“Despite the scope of his search, Cumberland will never find you, your highness. Your people will not betray you even for the reward that will be placed on your head. You will evade capture and return to France, just as you planned.”

Astonished looks were traded from one man to the next. Prince Charlie turned his attention to MacLeod who, while looking rather stunned himself, shrugged. “I did no’ tell her, sir.”

The prince looked to Ginny. “What more do you know of our plans?”

“Only that you plan to board a French ship at the same location where you arrived last year.”

“You know where the English outposts are between here and there?” He tapped the map spread out on the table.

“I do,” she assured him. “I’d be happy to mark the map with those locations if you will—”

“If?” Prince Charlie interrupted. “I do not make bargains, mistress.”

“Of course not. It is merely my sincere hope that your highness might find it in his heart to release me so that I might return to my family once the deed is done.” She clasped his hand and summoned every ounce of dewy femininity she possessed as she stared up at him. “They must be terribly worried. How wonderful it would be to return to them with the news that your highness is safely on his way to France.”

“But will return by the hand of God to find victory.”

Ginny blinked at the prince’s addendum but managed an emphatic nod. “Absolutely.”

“Then so it will be.”

\* \* \*

She was lying.

For all the miraculous insight she displayed—and which he, despite his impromptu declaration of her gift, did not believe—this last did not hold the same sincerity. Her explanation in regards to the

prince's sword and targe was remarkably convincing if not a wee bit overplayed. She exploited the prince's weaknesses with practiced ease. Himself, he'd almost forgotten how fanatical the prince could be about reinstating a Catholic king to the throne. How he was the right hand of God in the sacred endeavor, yet she manipulated those facts with practiced ease.

Why, then, did her assurance that Charles Edward would return to find victory ring false? Why not proclaim it with the same conviction?

*Because it wasn't true.*

All the confidence and certainty that had bolstered Coll through the trials of the past year faltered under the supposition. Had he given his fealty and blood to restore his country's sovereignty only to have the effort fail at the final hour? Had it all been for nothing?

A chilling thought.

With a shake of his head, he banished the thought, the doubt. This woman possessed no true gift to see into the future. He himself had anointed her with the ability as a viable alternative to being labeled a witch. For all Coll questioned the foundation of her knowledge regarding the camps, he wasn't such a superstitious arse as Strickland to accuse a woman of witchcraft simply because he could not imagine a logical alternative.

And he could not.

There was something else at play here. Something he could not put his finger on.

Virginia Hughes. So peculiar to name a Scottish lass after an English colony so christened in honor of an English monarch. It boggled the mind. It was far easier to use her preferred appellation.

Ginny.

How had she known? About their plans? Their destination? About any of it?

Given the way she fought capture, fought him...the way she looked upon Charles Edward with obvious relief as he called for a quill and ink, she hadn't foreseen any of this. His concession came as a surprise to her. She was no spy. She was no seer.

On the other hand, there was no amount of coincidence or luck to justify it.

What other explanation was there beyond Strickland's?

The map was turned to face Ginny and she stepped up to the table. She reached for the quill O'Sullivan held out to her. With a silent curse, Coll grabbed her hand. Her left hand. Was the woman mad? He took the quill and pressed it into her right hand.

"Och, ye daft lass!" he growled close to her ear. "I managed to allay their superstitions once, lass. Dinnae gi' them reason to reconsider."

Her brow furrowed but her fingers curled around the feathered quill. Dipping it rather sloppily into the inkwell, she marked several spots west of Invergarry not with X's but splotches of black.

"Is that all?" Charles Edward asked when she finished.

She nodded. "There are others farther to the north and south, though they should not affect your journey."

"Very well."

"May I have your permission to withdraw then?"

Coll could imagine the prince's thoughts. A gentleman at heart, Charles Edward would be naturally averse to mistreating a lady and inclined to free her. Contrarily, as a strategist—however inept he'd proven to be of late—he'd want to keep whatever assets he had to assure his safety close at hand.

He'd hesitate to let her go, and Coll found himself hoping that preference would guide the prince. She was an intriguing lass, was Ginny Hughes. After a year with little more than war and strategy to fill his head, having a puzzle as bonny as she to occupy his thoughts was proving a far more pleasant diversion. Not that their interaction itself had been enjoyable, precisely. She'd proven herself to be stubborn and temperamental. Aye, but she'd also displayed hints of a dry wit that surprised him. Combined with the pure mystery she presented, he was reluctant to see the last of her.

To that end, he could suggest they continue to detain her to assure she marked the map accurately. In assuring their safety, she could guarantee her own. A cruel, contrary twist of the knife given his vocal support. She might find her way to break his nose in truth should he do so.

"Ye ken she could have played ye false, sir?" MacDonald pointed out before the prince could respond. "She may have plotted the map to deliver ye directly into the Sassenachs' laps."

Charles Edward looked upon Coll to provide his input, forcing him to make his choice. He could concoct a dozen reasons to detain her based upon suspicion alone or he could listen to the instinct that assured him that despite the mystery behind her information, she was sincere in her motivation in forewarning them and deserved a respite.

"I dinnae believe that is the case," again Coll found himself speaking up on her behalf. "After many hours of interrogation, I've come to believe Miss Hughes has been genuine in her desire to aid us, yer highness. She is a loyal Scot at heart, if no' by birth."

"So be it," the prince conceded. "Mark my words, MacLeod, should your faith prove misguided it will be on your head."

Coll refrained from reminding the prince of the faith he himself had just placed in the lass and offered a stiff bow. With a nudge, Ginny bobbed another curtsy.

“Thank you, your highness,” she gushed, likely heady with her triumph.

The prince extended his hand. She stared at it as if unaware of his expectation.

“Kiss his bloody hand,” Coll hissed under his breath.

“Oh.” She blinked. “Oh, sure.”

## Chapter 10

"I deeply appreciate your assistance, Mr. MacLeod," Ginny whispered as he took her by the elbow and guided her away from the prince and his men. Now that her moment of triumph was upon her, she could relax and afford him some courtesy. "If not for you, my future would be in question. Your support was unexpected."

Beyond unexpected. For a guy who'd spent their every waking hour—literally, their *every* waking hour—together drilling her over and over for something new without once betraying the tiniest hint that he believed her...well, she'd been stunned when he spoke on her behalf. And by his guidance. She'd truly drawn a blank when Prince Charlie held out his hand. Maybe she was still stunned by the fact that she was face to face with *the* Bonny Prince Charlie, either way kissing it never occurred to her. An awkward experience, even more awkward than dangling across MacLeod's lap for hours.

Despite how he'd treated her, he at least deserved a sincere thank you.

And maybe, given the circumstances, he also deserved a little leeway for the extreme earnestness he'd displayed to kidnap her and question her. It wasn't simply a random group of Jacobite soldiers MacLeod had been determined to protect. It was Bonny Prince Charlie himself.

He didn't possess her foreknowledge of historic record to steer his course. That Prince Charlie would eventually return to France unharmed. Everything he was doing was driven by loyalty and patriotism, not malice.

For king and country.

The lengths to which he'd go to protect that made sense. It was difficult to continue holding his actions against him when what motivated him was so freakin' noble.

"Ye can cease yer fancy talk, lass. I ken it disnae come naturally to ye," he said. "Ye need no' be putting on airs w' me. We're no' at court. We're plain folk wi' plain speech. Speak in manner ye're familiar wi'."

"Very well. Tell me then, why did you do it? I assume you don't truly believe I'm a seer?"

"I dinnae."

"Then why say so?"

They reached a staircase at the opposite end of the hall. Unlike the steep spiral of the one she'd fled down earlier, this one was broad

with shallow risers and a carved bannister of gleaming oak. At a landing, they turned back to reach the next floor. MacLeod paused at the next landing in front of a window looking out over the loch, as if he'd been as taken by the view as she and couldn't help himself.

He must have been since he peered outward rather than at her. Personally, she'd much rather look at him. In a land of marvelous views, McLeod was one of the best.

*Yes, we know he's attractive, Gin. Get over it.*

"'Tis a serious charge, witchcraft. I couldnae let ye burn at the stake simply because Strickland is a superstitious arse."

His jaw flexed and released. Agitation or anger, she didn't know. Whether it was directed at her was also a mystery. "And that also had something to do with you insisting I use my right hand to write?"

"The ancient Celts once believed those who favor their left hand to be blessed. Conversely, most Christians believe that the devil baptized his followers wi' his left hand or that witches greet Satan wi' the same. I'm surprised yer parents dinnae beat it out of ye."

Sure, because that's how that used to work. She shook her head in disgust. "Well, thank you again for your help."

"My word alone wouldnae have guaranteed the prince's trust. 'Twas yer persuasive testimony that freed ye."

That persuasive testimony had been contrived from the single biography she'd read about Prince Charlie. The author opined that the prince suffered from bouts of anxiety and a desire to please those who agreed with him. This propensity left him vulnerable to excessive flattery. Conversely, he disliked and distrusted those who did not agree with him and left him suspicious of their motives, even those of the man who should have been his most trusted general.

He also believed himself the right hand of God's divine plan. She'd catered to that theory in her appeal and hadn't been disappointed with the results. That didn't mean the royal wasn't so fickle that he wouldn't change his mind with his next breath. She needed to make her getaway while she could.

The heavy pang of regret in her belly surprised Ginny. For what reason should she bear even an ounce of regret for leaving? There were other times in history she could choose to avoid Luke. Hell, there were even times in an unchartered future she could travel to. Times where her ex was long gone and would pose no threat. The entire timeline of human existence and beyond was at her fingertips!

"Rather dramatic at times, I'd say," Coll added. "Nevertheless, ye managed to convince Charles Edward of yer innocence."

The implication struck her then and a bitter laugh bubbled up in her throat. "But not you, right? I've told you again and again that I am not an agent of the crown. I have nothing to gain from this at all."



Pressing the heels of her hands to her temples, Ginny turned away from him, then back again. "How thick-headed can you possibly be? How's that for plain speech?"

Ugh, his brain was as thick as the—admittedly—brawny arms crossed over his chest. And to think she'd almost started to understand and accept his motives. To *like* him. Frustration propelled her up two more flights of stairs before he caught up with her and spun her around. His brown eyes shown almost bronze with irritation. She had no patience to cater to his fury when her own consumed her.

"Seriously, how do you function with such a suspicious nature? You're overthinking all of this. And coming from me, that's saying something."

"Overthinking?" His repetition of the word carried more of a question mark for its meaning rather than disbelief that she'd used it to describe him. "I dinnae care a whit what the prince has decreed. If ye remove the possibility of foresight from the equation, which we both ken is no' the case, ye've offered naught to adequately clarify the source of yer knowledge, lass. Nothing at all."

She threw up her arms, but before she could turn away, he caught her arm to hold her back.

"Then there is yer manner of speech. Yer choice of words. At one moment proper Scots and in the next bordering on gibberish. To my knowledge, the colonists have no' butchered the English tongue as much as ye."

There was no way to explain that sufficiently. Ginny had been raised by a proper Scotswoman. Between her mother and grandmother, she'd had the accent in her ear her entire life. It wasn't as difficult to mimic as the formal speech patterns she employed in an attempt to fit in and waylay the suspicions her modern verbiage would engender—and spectacularly failed! Yes, her concentrated effort slipped under the pressures of fear and anger. He had only himself to blame for that.

"You put a lot of effort into making all those men trust me. Why do that if you don't trust me, either?"

"I dinnae want yer life, lass. That disnae mean I dinnae want an honest answer still," he said. "'Tis no' about trust or distrust. In the end, my mind circles back to one thing. That is, all that ye've said makes nae sense. I find I cannae let ye leave wi'out a logical explanation for it all."

"In case I miraculously find my way back to my fictional English operatives in so timely a fashion that they will have no troubles at all in catching up with you?" The words dripped with sarcasm. What luck, captured by the one rational man among them. "Even if I ever presented such a threat, I don't pose much of one anymore."

"I'm afraid I dinnae agree," he argued. "Had I the choice, I would continue to detain ye until I am more confident in the matter."

"But you don't," she shot back and yanked her arm free of his grasp. Lifting her skirts, she climbed the stairs once more, calling over her shoulder. "Thanks again for that, by the way."

"I could have another word wi' the prince."

Her steps slowed and she paused to look back at him unable to gauge whether the threat was a valid one. "I think he would have no use for a man who couldn't make up his mind, don't you?" She could hear his teeth grind and satisfaction shot through her. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way."

"This isnae over, lass," he called after her.

"Oh, I think it is."

Triumphant, Ginny continued up the stairs to retrieve her cloak from the tower room. After that, it might be best to make haste in case he was serious in his threat to convince Prince Charlie to revoke his pardon. She needed to figure out how to escape the castle without passing through the hall where the prince and his men were.

Or coming across MacLeod again.

She just reached the tower room when someone grabbed her arm and yanked her inside.

"The lad's right, lassie, this isnae over by far."

## Chapter 11

“You!” Her jaw dropped.

“Ye!” he said at the same time. “Ye’re no’ supposed to be here, lassie.”

“I could say the same about you!”

Ginny gawped at the old man before her, seeing but not quite believing. Glancing down, she took in the faded blue and brown kilt that hung long over beige stockings and leather brogues. He wore a long tan coat over a rough woven shirt. Tufts of grey hair curled around the bottom of his woolen tam. Unlike the last time she’d seen him, there was no humor in his blue eyes or mischievous smile on his lips.

Apparently Granny’s new boyfriend was keeping a few secrets!

“Donell?” It was Donell, wasn’t it? “What are you doing here?”

“To throw yer own words back at ye, I could ask the same of ye,” he snapped. “Do ye have any idea what ye’ve done, lass?”

How could she, when she still had no firm grasp on what she was seeing? “How do you know anything about it? How did you get here?”

“Who do ye think gave yer sister her device? Och, ye ken nothing of what ye’re about, what ye’ve done?” He looked so furious she thought he was about to burst. He paced a few steps away and turned back. “Ye’ve come here wi’out thought for what ye’ve changed in the process. What were ye thinking?”

“I...” Ginny blinked, taken aback by his venom. “Well, I...”

“Och, I dinnae have time for this. I’m living three lives as it is trying to right the future. Three!” He threw up as many fingers between them to emphasize his point. As if it explained anything. She had no idea what he was talking about. “I dinnae have time to be cleaning up yer mess.”

“My mess? What have I done?”

“Ye’ve gone and gotten Bonny Prince Charlie captured by the royalists, ye daffy lass.” He poked a finger into her sternum. “He would have made his way back to France, as he well should, wi’out yer bugged fingers in the pie. But no’ any longer, thanks to ye.”

“But I didn’t... I mean, I helped—”

“Yer so-called help will be the end of him, lassie.” There should have been steam coming out of his ears, he was so furious. “The damage thus far cannae be undone, but blast it, from here on out, ye’ll bloody well make it right.”

Something smacked Ginny in the chest and she looked down at the canvas bag he'd thrust at her. *Her* bag! The same one she'd dropped the previous day. She wanted to ask where he'd found it, how he'd known where it was. However, Donell walked away from her, a violent stream of Gaelic under his breath that could only be curses. His kilt flapped around his knees as he flung open the door. He was surprisingly fast and nimble so he was almost to the stairs before she found her voice.

"Wait! How did you—"

"I dinnae have time to mend yer mistakes. Ye'll fix it, lassie, and fix it well or by God, there will be hell to pay!"

\* \* \*

With each of Donell's fading curses, chunks of Ginny's triumph fell away with a splash akin to that of a calving glacier. She stared after him dumbfounded by both his sudden appearance and his disheartening revelation. How had her actions led to Prince Charlie's apprehension? She'd pointed him *away* from the threat. Not to it.

Puzzling over the accusation, she looped her bag over her head and across her chest then dug into its depths for the time travel device. Donell's time travel device. What had he meant about living three lives? About trying to right the future? Brontë hadn't mentioned anything about that.

Then again, Ginny hadn't asked the questions that could have given her those answers. No, she'd only thought about herself, her desire to get as far away from Luke as possible. All available resources on the implications of time travel—however fictional they might be—advised against interfering with past events. The butterfly effect alone showed how even the smallest act could have a significant impact. Even a minute in this time could have set off some unseen ripple. There was no way to tell what she'd done to change the course of history.

No way to know what she was supposed to do to fix it.

The damage thus far couldn't be undone, he said. Of course. Given the suppositions of the grandfather paradox, she couldn't return and tell herself not to travel back in time. She would only know that because she already had.

Staring out the window, this time she didn't see the breathtaking view but her possible escape. She could follow the loch north back to her car and leave this all behind. Leave Prince Charlie to his new fate. What would it matter? He never returned to Scotland to continue this rebellion anyway. Rather than die a drunkard in Italy, maybe he died in a posh cell in the Tower of London instead. What could it matter?

It mattered. Ginny closed her eyes with a sigh. Whatever it was, it mattered. Not only because Donell said so. Every detail of the world's

history that she loved and studied had made the world of her time what it was. Remove one piece of it, however small, the rest could fall like dominos. Besides, there was more than the prince's fate to consider. There were the lives of his men.

There was MacLeod.

A few minutes ago, she justified his actions because he didn't know all would be well in the end. Now she didn't, either.

Raised voices caught her attention and she followed them to an open window in one of the west-facing rooms. Roughly dressed men, likely servants or grooms, led horses into the courtyard below. Prince Charlie looked on while servants hurried out of the castle carrying what looked like leather saddlebags and rolled pallets. The prince's men secured them behind the saddles, along with long rifles. The prince and his men were making preparations to depart.

MacLeod exited the castle and called out to one of the men to bring his horse. He'd taken the time to don a long navy wool waistcoat with the many folds of a simply knotted cravat tucked into the top. Over it, he wore a heavy coffee brown coat. A wide leather strap crossed over one shoulder and buckled across his chest, maybe to hold his sword, she couldn't tell from this distance.

The sight roused a painful pang in her chest. Regret, Ginny decided. Nothing more. She owed him an apology for the way she'd so cruelly mocked his support for his cause. Especially when she found such devotion rather admirable.

What better way to show her appreciation for saving her ass downstairs than to send him to his death?

What other choice did she have?

## Chapter 12

Coll glanced up at the tower window as they mounted, wondering if Ginny were up there watching...waiting for them to depart. What had he expected? A mournful farewell?

"I confess I would have appreciated to sleep an hour or two more before we set off once more," the prince said as he settled himself in the saddle.

Coll couldn't argue with Charles Edward. These past days had taken a toll on them all. Some of their party would get a reprieve. Sir Thomas Sheridan, Sir John MacDonald, and the marquis, William Murray, were too elderly to take on the rigorous travel ahead. Aeneas MacDonald would arrange transport for the prince once they reached Arisaig while George Kelly and Francis Strickland carried messages back to the prince's generals. Only O'Sullivan, Burke, and their host's son, a Catholic priest, would continue on while the rest of the men remained behind here or would return to Ruthven to act as messengers. They spurred their horses into motion.

"Wait! Wait for me!"

They all turned in surprise. Even the horses reared and stomped their feet to protest, being spurred into motion and reined in almost simultaneously. However, no one could be so astonished as Coll when Ginny ran out of the castle.

"What is this, Miss Hughes?" Charles Edward was the one to ask the question they all thought. After all the hours she spent trying to bargain for her release or simply run away, he couldn't conceive what had brought on this sudden reversal. "I granted you permission to take your leave and if I may say, you seemed eager to depart."

She stopped and dropped a hasty curtsy, her cloak pooling in the dust as she did so. "I know, your highness, and I am most grateful for your kindness. Nevertheless, it has...rather, that is, I have *seen* new dangers ahead for you. I thought the best solution would be for me to accompany you so I might help steer you away from any trouble as it presents itself. I'm at your disposal, if it pleases you."

Coll had never heard such nonsense in all his days. Beyond the fact that they both knew she was no seer, it was clear to anyone with ears that she improvised the tale as she spoke. She had no more foresight about what going to happen in the days to come than he.

Why then would she now insist on joining them? What purpose drove her?

“Very well,” the prince decreed without demonstrating an iota of Coll’s reserve. “Have a horse prepared for the lady.”

“She will ride wi’ me.” Coll circumvented her protest by adding, “Miss Hughes confessed to me yesterday that she disnae ride well and we will need to proceed at a good pace.”

“So be it. Let us be away.”

Coll reached out a hand to Ginny who stared at it as if it were a snake waiting to strike. “Hurry on now, lass. Our prince awaits.”

“Of course.”

When she hesitated as if she couldn’t determine how to proceed, he flexed his foot up impatiently. “Step up, lass.”

“Allow me, lassie.” Burke dismounted and went to her side, cupping his hands. “Up wi’ ye now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Burke.”

She favored him with a smile and accepted his aid. The attempt was so clumsy, Coll would have thought she’d never ridden pillion before. Without time for a tutorial, he settled her on his lap. She clutched first the horse’s mane then the pommel, bouncing stiffly with each stride that carried them away.

Questions raced through his mind, vying to be the first to reach his tongue. Better to think of those rather than to give undue consideration to the soft bottom once again nestled against his groin.

“Calm yerself, lassie,” Burke said as he reigned in beside them. “He willnae let ye fall.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t have utter faith in him.”

There it was again. That hint of bruising wit she’d exhibited the previous night. Ever stoic, Burke’s lips twitched. Coll had a more difficult time swallowing his amusement.

“I willnae and I hivnae yet said something to ye that I dinnae mean. I cannae say the same for ye. Did ye no’ a half hour past beg for yer freedom? Ardently declare yer need to return to yer loved ones? Yet here ye are. I cannae help but wonder what has changed yer mind.”

“It’s just that I find your company so very enjoyable, I couldn’t help myself.”

There was such a wealth of irony in the words, this time he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ugh, how did I get here?” she mused under her breath.

The question hadn’t been meant for him, yet he answered it anyway. “I get the impression that ye’re precisely where ye mean to be.”

“Ha, there are so many other places I’d rather be, believe me.”

She canted to the side and Coll righted her, holding her securely with his free arm as he caught up with the others. “My God, was my

claim prophetic? Have ye never ridden a horse at all?"

"Of course I have."

"Ye are a miserable liar, lass."

"And you're an utter asshole," she shot back. "Hear any truth in that?"

Burke chuckled openly at that. "Has she got ye pegged, lad?"

Amusement again swelled in Coll's chest and in his heart, the sensation a far cry from the ponderous weight that he'd carried with him this past year. The weight that should be upon him this very moment as Charles Edward was once again exposed to potential danger.

Burke rode ahead to scout the area. Coll waited for Ginny to address this question with something other than sarcasm. To explain the danger that had changed her mind and compelled her to carry on with them. As with all his questions, he was left wanting.

Without conversation, even argument to distract him, Coll's mind traveled no further than the warm bottom in his lap as he sought something else to focus on. Unless it was the curve of her waist beneath his hand or the scent of her hair. A steady breeze lifted her curls until they danced upon the wind to tease his cheeks and chin like feathers. He fought the urge to bury his face in the crook of her neck and find out if her entire body carried that fresh, floral smell.

He forced himself to concentrate on the potential danger ahead. Chances abounded for them to be caught before he could see Prince Charles Edward safely aboard a French ship yet every thought circled back to Ginny. Though he wasn't yet satisfied with her explanation of *how* she knew of the royalist outposts, he trusted that they existed as she had marked them. He appreciated the security her knowledge allowed them. Removing one risk factor from those eased his mind considerably.

And allowed him more time to dwell on her.

"If ye were a true Scotswoman and no' a colonist, I'd say ye should take comfort in knowing yer sacrifice is being made for the greater good," he said if only to distract himself. "Because of yer assistance, however reluctant, there is a greater guarantee that we will survive to fight again. The cause will carry on."

"The Stuart cause." She craned her neck to look back at the prince. A sigh softened her rigid posture. "Bonny Prince Charlie. In spite of this entire mess, I still can't entirely believe that's him."

She hadn't known. That made her fortuitous appearance even more curious.

"He's so...so..." she paused with a shake of her head. "I don't know. Young?"

Her appalled emphasis on the word brought a smile to his lips.



“We are of an age, the prince and I. Six and twenty years.”

“Really? You seem far more mature.” Her accent moderated once more. “I suppose that’s the difference between a pampered life and a normal one.”

“What makes ye think I’ve no’ led a pampered life?” he asked with a jolt of amusement. “I may have been cosseted wi’in an inch of my life for all ye ken.”

“No one would ever look at you and think you spent your life in a plush Italian palazzo being waited on hand and foot.” A husky chuckle filled the air and shot straight to his groin. “I’ll be interested in seeing how the prince copes with the hardships of a hasty escape. I have to say, there’s a general lack of urgency among you all given the potential danger of the situation.”

Her comment roused an aspect of her involvement Coll hadn’t considered. Their risk had become hers. The peril they faced now encompassed her. As greatly as she vexed him, he would never forgive himself if she came to any harm. He didn’t express the breadth of his concern. Rather he narrowed it to the most immediate situation. “How will ye cope? We need to move with haste across inhospitable terrain. The journey to Arisaig will be an arduous one.”

“I will manage just fine, thanks.” The assurance was crisp, tinged with offense he hadn’t intended. “It doesn’t appear that you’re planning to go follow the loch down to Achnacarry or even Torlundy before turning west. Why not? Wouldn’t that be the easiest way?”

“Do I appear too dull to ken the easiest way?”

“I don’t think you want me to answer that.”

He stifled a laugh, once again taken by her salty wit. “Och, definitely no’.”

If he wasn’t mistaken, there was a hint of a smile curving her lips as she turned her head to brush a strand of hair from her cheek. She caught the curly mass in its entirety and lifted her arms behind her head to swiftly braid the long length. Once done, she removed a thick, black string from around her wrist and secured the ends of the plait. He frowned. No, she didn’t tie it. Rather she twisted it and pulled the hair through several times even though it already appeared to be as tight as possible.

“What path do you mean to take from here?” she asked as she pulled her braid over her shoulder, removing the curiosity from his sight.

“Given yer timely premonition of danger, should ye no’ be the one to tell me?” he taunted her. “Where is this danger ye’ve foreseen, if it exists a’tall? Ye’ve yet to explain yer change of heart. Mayhap ’tis naught to fear and ye simply couldnae bear to part from my company in truth?”

Her chin lifted. "Your brand of charm is the sort that repels women, not attracts them."

God help him but he enjoyed her tart humor. Enjoyment warred with obligation. Bugger it all, he couldn't let it go. She was an enigma. One that he couldn't help but want to solve. "I should warn ye, I feel it my duty to begin our interrogation again. What would lead ye to suspect danger ahead for the prince? What is it?"

"I don't know exactly." A sigh lifted her shoulders. "I know it's a big ask, but I need you to trust me. Trust that I want nothing more than what you want."

A *big ask* indeed.

"If ye want my trust, lass, ye maun gi' me something. Some truth. Let's begin wi' the easiest. How did ye ken where the encampments are?"

## Chapter 13

“What is it they say about dogs and bones?”

Ginny had been so caught up in figuring out how she was supposed to fix what so far appeared to be unbroken—well, that and staying on the horse—that she couldn’t summon an ounce of the frustration that had sparked their argument on the stairs an hour past.

And to be fair, while she owed him an apology still, she owed him something more than continued denial. Especially when he had every right to doubt her. Honestly, she was shocked that the rest of them weren’t just as skeptical of her story.

However deserved, she wasn’t certain *what* she could tell him.

“Did I mention how you’re overthinking this whole thing?”

“Och, there’s another thing. What is this word, *overthinking*?”

It’d become something of a family joke the way Ginny overthought everything. She rehearsed conversations to avoid confrontation. She replayed and revised past conversations and events as if afterthought could change their outcome. As if she could go back and sidestep each argument she’d had with her ex-husband.

Or avoid him from the very start.

Just as she’d like to have the opportunity to go back and avoid meeting MacLeod, as well.

She stressed over things before there was even anything to stress about. Right now, some sub-function of her brain was strategizing every possible outcome of this misadventure. Most with disagreeable conclusions.

Now she’d have to add the stress of thinking about more than tone, accent, and delivery when addressing these men; she’d have to consider the etymology of every word and phrase as well.

“It’s means precisely what it sounds like,” she told him. “It’s a word I made up to describe thinking too deeply about something rather than taking it at face value.”

“So I’m to take all ye’ve said wi’out question? Trust wi’out reason?” He growled against her ear. The warm brush of his breath against her neck sent a shiver down her spine. One that had nothing to do with anxiety.

*Really, Gin?* She chastised herself. *Hardly the moment.*

Her inward self merely shrugged off the reprimand.

“You could. It would be far simpler for us both.”

“I dinnae believe the simplest route is best in this case,” he

argued. "I want to trust ye, lass. I need to ken ye have the same dedication to seeing Charles Edward to safety as I. I cannae pin that on faith alone."

She was getting the feeling there wasn't much MacLeod wouldn't do for his country and by extension Prince Charlie. His loyalty was admirable. Like the movie heroes of old who'd ridden off into the sunset as they were now. Here, this wasn't the end of their adventure but the beginning. No happily ever after. They had yet to face their trials. Find out if they would defeat the bad guys and walk away unscathed.

Ginny didn't yet know what she'd gotten these men into. She'd have to fix that before she could prove her commitment to ensuring their safety. Then she could ride off into a sunset just like this one with the breathtaking landscape of Glengarry around her, the mountains becoming little more than a dark silhouette against the fiery red and orange of the skies beyond.

As they had the night before, the men rode nonstop. There was no opportunity for her to slip away, pop back to her time, and do the necessary research. Rather than ponder the path to that happily ever after without any basis in historical fact or think overmuch about the solid presence at her back, she turned her attention to Prince Charlie.

He was far more manly than she would have thought a young, pampered prince would be, especially when he was so often depicted in an effeminate manner. Not once did he complain about the rough terrain, even when they left the road behind and veered off on some imperceptible path. They crossed a dozen waterways flowing down from the hills, from shallow creeks to near rapids. The prince not only handled his horse with grace, he also helped the young cleric at one point. And did so with good cheer and none of the petulance she would have expected.

Catching her assessment, he dropped back to ride close by. "How are you faring, Miss Hughes? I do not imagine a young lady such as yourself has need to travel with such haste and through uncivilized environs."

"No, your highness." Never on horseback, anyway. "I do find the scenery most picturesque, however. Don't you agree?"

"Indeed, indeed." He scanned the horizon and drummed his fingers on his thigh. "Unfortunately, it is difficult to fully appreciate it when danger might be lurking in the darkness as it falls. Then again, surely you would know if there were eminent peril."

That was the working theory. Ginny nodded. "Of course."

The assurance wasn't enough to satisfy the prince. "Tell me more of what you have seen that prompted you to rejoin my entourage."

"Regrettably, the fine details have yet to be revealed," she said,

ignoring MacLeod's huff of amusement against the nape of her neck. "But, as you said, the threat is not eminent. There is no reason to worry tonight so you may enjoy the sunset at your leisure."

Prince Charlie looked to the horizon, still drumming his fingers. The diversion didn't last long enough to suit Ginny. "Tell me more about your gift. How long have you possessed it?"

She scrambled for a convincing story. "I have long been sensitive to sensations of foreboding"—not entirely a lie—"however, it is only recently that I've been able to see the days ahead more vividly."

Also not a lie. Ginny was proud of herself.

"Interesting." His fingers stilled for a moment, then resumed their beat. "What else have you foreseen?"

Easy enough for a history teacher. "The struggle between France and England for control of the American colonies will soon turn to open warfare. It will last for almost a decade before England wins and pushes the French farther to the north."

The prince's brows rose. "Another triumph for us then. Huzzah. And is it my father or I who shall sit on the throne when that victory occurs?"

*Shit.*

"It is never a good thing to know too much about the future, your highness."

*Great to see how desperate you are. Paraphrasing Doc Brown now, Gin?*

"I cannot see why not."

"Aye, why no'?" MacLeod murmured in her ear with a hint of mockery.

"If I were to provide details, would you say and do things because I told you to or would you do them of your own free will?" she said. "Your decisions need to be your own, your highness. Not influenced by foreknowledge."

Nice. She should have majored in philosophy.

Prince Charlie nodded and finally his fingers quieted their beat. "Yes, I see. As God is omniscient yet leaves it to us to do His will without His insight to guide us. My choices mold my future and that of Scotland and England both." He held a small flask aloft. "It will be as God himself commands. Huzzah, I say. "

There was a whole debate there about how omniscience might negate free will. Ginny wasn't going to touch it with a ten-foot pole. She'd leave that argument to David Hume and Immanuel Kant in the years to come.

At any rate, the prince was satisfied. She released a sigh of relief when he drifted away to answer O'Sullivan's questions. Twilight turned to darkness and they had only the lantern Burke carried at the

head of their caravan to break the night. She couldn't determine how they knew where they were.

Or where to go from here.

"Nicely done," MacLeod said in a low burr. "Ye've satisfied the prince's curiosity quite handily. Mine, on the other hand, has only been reborn."

Ginny grimaced. "Did it ever die?"

Would it ever die? He wasn't only a suspicious man, he was a smart one. He knew there was something off about her and would be relentless until he figured it out. Anything she discovered in the days to come regarding the historical facts of this expedition would only serve to raise more questions and deepen MacLeod's distrust. There had to be a way to gain his trust so that he might take what was to come with an ounce of faith. To get there, there would have to be truth.

Or some measure of it.

"Do you know what eidetic memory is?"

If one could feel a frown, she felt it tense his body. "Is this another of yer imaginary words?"

"No, it's a scientific term for one's ability to remember what they've seen." She twisted around to look up at him. She could barely make out his expression. "Everyone has a varied ability to remember things for a little while before the memory fades, right? Well, I have something called hyperthymesia—um, a photographic...no, that won't do. Let's call it perfect recall. I remember things I've experienced, read, or seen for far longer than most."

MacLeod's brow smoothed and he nodded slowly. "I've heard of such. 'Tis a rare gift."

Ginny wrinkled her nose and turned back around. "Not as much of a gift as you might think."

Her head was like a library of insignificant trivia. She only needed to pull it off the mental shelf to review it. Special moments, happy times of her life. Unfortunately, the same could be said of the bad. In the past couple of years, there had been plenty of the bad. Within the past day, as well. Bloody entrails spilled across the moor every time she closed her eyes.

"Ye're saying, all it took was a single look at a map and ye've memorized it?"

"Emblazoned on my mind. Simple as that."

"I believe ye."

About time! "Thank—"

"About that, at any rate. There is still yer knowledge of our destination to consider."

Rotating in his lap, she stared up at him in disbelief. "Are you

shitting me? Ugh! Jestin'g? Jokin'g?"

*What the actual fuck.* Ginny longed to say those words and many more equally inappropriate ones but knew modern profanity would only redouble his maddening, impossible suspicions. While she could appreciate the gravity of his position and the validity of his need to assure the prince's continued safety, her every attempt to gain his trust seemed only to dig a deeper hole for herself.

"I dinnae. No' when ye hold intelligence that will aid our escape," he told her. "The safety of these men is more valuable than yer sensibilities. I feel I maun question everything."

She showed him her back and crossed her arms. "It's an annoying habit."

"Yet one I will persist in until I'm satisfied."

"Somehow I doubt you're the type of man who will ever be satisfied."

His chest stilled at her back before a soft rush of breath teased her ear. Was it her or was that his heartbeat she felt? That *rapid* heartbeat. An image flashed through her mind, hot and sweaty, on how her words might be taken another way. Never satisfied. Always wanting more. Needing it. Taking it. Ginny shivered at the thought.

*Really?* She rolled her eyes. *Did I not point out that this was not the time?*

Of all the moments. Why him? Why now? Ugh, she really must have a thing for tyrants and assholes. What else could explain this energy that flowed between them and set her pulse racing? It certainly wasn't his kindness and charm.

Except he wasn't one hundred percent an asshole. He had shown her some kindness, even when it hadn't benefitted himself to do so. Even when he had life-altering reasons to pursue the truth. Another man might have tried to beat it out of her.

Not MacLeod. She was certain he presented no danger to her. In a physical sense, at least. Even when he'd chased her down, Ginny feared only for her freedom, not her life.

With the control of freedom and future back in her hands, that obstacle was removed. Even when she should be worrying over the tangible peril awaiting in the days ahead of her, every fiber of her being was alive with awareness of the warm, solid presence at her back.

It was the first time in a long time that she'd been so close to a man for such an extended period of time. Never one like MacLeod, who embodied all those wild dreams that deep down a woman knew would never be more than that. He was the stuff of fiction. Unattainable. Pure fantasy.

One that came with a few risks of its own.

“Ginny.”

Her name had never sounded as erotic as it did in a thick gruff Scottish brogue. She looked down to find that her hand had somehow, of its own accord, slipped over the manly hand holding the reins. Spellbound, she trailed her fingers up his wrist then down again. The tips of her fingers tingled and warmed.

“Lass.”

There was warning in the word. Denial. He wanted her but didn't want to want her. A stab of lust warred with her peace of mind. No, she didn't want him. Didn't want to want him either. Nevertheless, a part of her wanted to take it as a challenge. That part of her that responded to simple words with a sensual quiver that settled in her belly, both apprehensive and oddly thrilling.

Ugh, mind and body needed to get on the same page. His proximity left her flustered if she thought too deeply about it and it led to thoughts she shouldn't be having. That would not do. She had a job to do. Nothing more.

Logic did nothing to override that tinge of desire.

As if he sensed her response, his hold around her waist loosened. His fingers splayed across her abdomen, compelling her closer to him in a way an iron grip never could. She softened against him, felt the heat of his arousal and an answering heat pooled between her legs. Warm breath caressed her neck. His lips were there, a heartbeat away...

“I want...”

“Yes?”

“To trust ye, lass,” he finished, straightening behind her. “If ye want to convince me that yer intentions are pure, I require honesty. Nothing more than that.”

“Nothing more...?” Ginny stiffened as well. Indignation, of course. It couldn't have been anything else.

*You mean like disappointment?*

*Shut it, Ginny!*

“You think I was planning on seducing you into complacency or something?”

“Were ye no’?”

“You're the one who misinterpreted what I said for some double *entendre*, MacLeod,” she berated him with a sneer. No chance she was frustrated by his recall to reality. “I said what I said. And only that. I'm here to do you a bloody favor. Not a damned thing beyond that. You should start showing a little freakin' appreciation before I decide to leave you to deal with it on your own.”

“‘Freakin’?”

Frustration boiled up and threatened to blow. What was that



phrase he'd used so eloquently?

“Och, haud yer wheesht!”

## Chapter 14

*Lochebar Region of the Highlands, Scotland  
April 18, 1746*

'Twas a rare talent of women, that ability to punish a man with silence. There was no peace in it. Only the weight of condemnation and a measure of dread as to when the silence would end and the harping begin.

Ginny hadn't had another word to spare for him after his rash accusation. Not that he blamed her. He had only himself to blame for deliberately misreading her actions then using them as a weapon to slice through the veil of passion that had enveloped them. Och, the lass was a lush handful. She couldn't begin to know how her words, however innocent, affected him, as their intimate proximity had tormented him all through the endless day. He'd been looking for an excuse, any excuse, to touch her.

And she'd shared that burgeoning passion...if only for a moment.

Coll's desire lingered far longer until, in the early hours of the morning, they reached a cottage owned by Donald Cameron of Glenpean. The threat of discovery hung over their heads, yet it wasn't what contributed to yet another night of tossing and turning before sleep found him at long last. It had been unsatiated desire.

Only to be awoken this morning amid the most erotic dream he'd had since the early days of manhood. At least that was far preferable to the nightmares that had consumed his few other snippets of sleep recently.

"Charles Edward wants ye to confer with Cameron on the remainder of our journey," O'Sullivan told him with a yawn. "And he wants ye to bring the lass."

"Good morn to ye as well," Coll mumbled under his breath as the Irishman departed before realizing he'd employed Ginny's tart greeting from the previous morning.

Already she'd gotten under his skin.

With a grim grunt, he climbed to his feet and adjusted the tartan he'd wrapped around himself to warm him through the night back into some semblance of a kilt before seeking the lass out. He found her exactly where he'd left her in the next stall of Cameron's stable beside the one he'd claimed as his bed. She was sound asleep, curled into a ball with her cloak bundled around her.

“Wake up, lass.”

The thick line of her dark brows furrowed, her wide lush lips puckered. She didn't appreciate the interruption. Fought it, as she'd fought him since the moment they'd met.

Batting down his amusement, Coll shook her shoulder. “Awaken, lass.”

Her eyelids fluttered, then opened. As before, the unusual color entranced him. Fresh from her slumber, they held none of the frustration and anger they normally did. Only a stirring warmth that, combined with her sweet sleepy smile, renewed the ache in his groin that had taken hours to banish.

Not so easily as her smile faded away and quickly as her gaze narrowed once more. With an unintelligible grumble, she cast off her cloak and stood. Stretching her arms over her head, she then bent forward at the waist and flattened her palms on the stone floor. When she straightened once more, her tangled hair fell in waves around her cheeks and shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed. Full breasts swelled against the loosened laces of her black bodice.

She looked quite, quite beddable.

“Omigod, I thought that cot yesterday was bad.”

Coll cleared his throat as she continued to twist from side to side, breasts straining against her bodice. “Charles Edward wants to speak wi' ye about the dangers ahead before we depart.”

“Oh, that.” Her lips twisted as she shook her head. “I need a minute first, if you don't mind.”

“There's nae time to dawdle, lass. He'd like to speak wi' ye straight away.”

“Unless you would like to add a whole new level of awkwardness to our relationship, I would appreciate a minute or two to...” She trailed off and tilted her head toward the door.

Heat rose to his cheeks. Aye, an uncomfortable warmth. It had been some time since he'd been privy to the routine of a lady's morning ablutions. He cleared his throat again and went to the door. “Come to the cottage once ye've...er, once ye're ready. Dinnae go far.”

“I won't. Um, MacLeod, you don't happen to have the time do you? The precise time?”

“Why? Do ye have somewhere to be, lass?”

“In a manner of speaking...”

\* \* \*

*Present Day*

Not far. Only a couple hundred years or so.

The overcast April morning became a sunny spring afternoon in a flash of light. Ginny's gamble that the clearing behind the stable

would remain a clearing in her time and not a town center paid off. After reaching the western end of Loch Garry last night, they'd turned south into the rolling Highland hills. No roads, no towns, no people. The area was pure wilderness.

And if she recalled correctly—and most assuredly, she did—that characteristic of the region hadn't changed. Much to her regret. She'd traded historical boondocks for the modern version. Granted, the scenery was breathtaking. Of all the places she'd been, there was nothing to match the Highlands in springtime. The vibrant hues of the many layers of hill upon rolling hill, of glen and stream with the sun shining down upon it all was enough to make the soul weep.

And she would, the instant she wasn't bogged down by disappointment. Cameron's squat cottage with its stone walls packed with earth and deeply pitched grassy turf roof was now nothing more than crumbling rubble. The stables, once a miniature version of the house, a mere indentation on the ground. Turning about, she confirmed that there was no sign of civilization to be found other than a series of power lines in the distance.

"Great, just great, Ginny," she mumbled as she traded the device for her phone. "Should have thought about this before."

Like when they were at Invergarry Castle, a comparative mecca of civilization next to this. That would have been a much better time for this research trip. Waking her phone, she found her power down to forty percent. Those battery levels would be bled dry in the effort to connect to some cell service. Given the number of dead zones around here, she'd be lucky to connect at all.

Pacing in slow, expanding circles, she prayed for a connection. Her prayers were answered with a series of dreaded *ping, ping, pings* to herald incoming messages. Ginny ignored them and opened her maps app. Dropping a pin to mark her present location, she found the nearest town and began to walk. She'd been pretty snappy with MacLeod yesterday. Some deserved, some driven by hunger. She needed sustenance. There was no way she was going to choke down another oat cake. A problem easily solved with a morning stroll.

Then there was the other problem.

With the prince taking sole occupancy of Cameron's cottage, their host had joined the rest of them in the stables. While the sleeping conditions hadn't been optimal, they'd been made worse by the disharmonious snores and snorts of her roommates. On top of that, her overactive mind replayed that incident with MacLeod over and over again. What she should have done—optimally cut it off before it ever happened—and what she might have done in the perfect sexual fantasy.

Sometimes she wished she could just turn it off. Close the fifty

open tabs in her mental browser, shut off the music in the background, and experience true peace of mind for once in her life.

Today wasn't going to be that day.

The long night had left her frustrated in more ways than one. Upside, it had also given her plenty of time to mull over this mission Donell assigned her. She focused on that. That meant first, finding out where it all went wrong. She couldn't fix what wasn't broken. She needed to know what she'd gotten herself into by creating a new timeline and determine how and when Prince Charlie was captured. Second would be figuring out how to undo it. She could theorize to death but without circling back to step one was nothing more than that.

None of it could be accomplished in the *there* and *then*. She needed the *here* and *now*.

While she walked, she drank the remainder of her water and mourned the fact that she'd eaten all her snacks while cooling her heels at Urquhart Castle. Maybe she should have grabbed another oat cake to take the edge off her hunger. No, it would be worth the wait.

As she walked, she searched the internet for the incident she'd somehow incited. Finding an article, then another, she put together an idea of where not to be, and more vaguely, when. She was able to discover was that Prince Charlie never made it past Arisaig, nothing more. Without a more detailed timeline, it would be difficult, but not impossible, to manage.

Research kept her occupied over the two and a half hours it took to reach the nearest town, if it could be called that. Calling it a village or even a hamlet would be generous. It was more of an outpost. A half dozen small houses scattered along a single-track road embedded in the hillside. There wasn't even a gas station. Only one building bore any sort of commercial signage.

Conscious of her outlandish garb, Ginny entered and was welcomed by the sound of a tinkling bell. That and the stares of the two older men and one woman who sat at a small table near the far window and another woman who stood nearby. Ginny put on her best brogue and greeted them cheerfully and received the compulsory, if restrained reception in return.

The establishment was typical of the more isolated areas of the Highlands. Over the years she'd seen more than one like it. Combination café, grocery, pharmacy, and most likely post office to boot. Aware of the inquisitive eyes following her, she scanned the shelves along the walls and picked up a few necessities like a toothbrush and paste, a small brush, and ointment for the many bug bites she'd gotten while meandering through hills on a damp spring evening. A supply of canned goods might have come in handy.

Unfortunately, a can opener and reasonable explanations would be hard to come by where she was going.

“Anything else for ye?” The woman who’d been standing by the table when she entered joined Ginny at the counter where she deposited her purchases.

“Aye, I’d love one these apple pastries here.” She tapped the curved glass enclosure of the display case next to them. “And is that a beef pie?”

“Minced lamb.”

Ginny’s mouth watered. “I’ll take one...no, two of those.”

“Any—”

“And a blueberry scone. Oh, and this”—she added a fresh bottle of water and impulsively grabbed a tin of shortbread biscuits—“and this.”

The woman raised a brow.

Without a word, Ginny slid a Wham candy bar into the pile with a guilty shrug. It never ended well when she shopped on an empty stomach.

The shopkeeper waited.

“Coffee?” Ginny asked with a wince. “To go? Sorry. That’s it. I swear.”

Asking for coffee to go in a place like this was probably a bigger sin than any she’d ever committed. Outside of the major cities—and only rarely then, since the advent of Starbucks—coffee and tea in Scotland were meant to be taken with leisure. One didn’t walk around, cup in hand, as if they hadn’t the time or inclination to share one over long conversation, like the group by the window. In fact, she anticipated being informed that there were no paper cups available.

And there weren’t.

The woman poured coffee into a metal thermos and pushed it across the counter along with a small sugar bowl and silver creamer. “I’m charging ye for the thermos.”

She probably doubled her annual revenue by accommodating weary travelers in the same manner. “Fair enough.”

Ginny dug her debit card out of her handbag, thankful that form of payment was even an option in this tiny shop. Separating the pastry, Ginny loaded the rest into her bag, laced her coffee with so much cream and sugar it wasn’t truly coffee anymore, and turned to leave.

“Ye’re no’ going to explain yerself a’tall, are ye?”

“No, ma’am,” she answered as brightly as the bell on the door.

Munching on the apple tart, she backtracked the way she’d come. A mile into her return journey, her stomach continued to growl, desperate, no doubt, for more after two days of meager offerings. She

satisfied the beast within by finishing off the scone and one of the meat pies as well. By the time the coffee was half gone, she felt more human than she had in days. Well-fed girl with a plan. Things were looking up.

Ginny's phone vibrated in her pocket making her jump. Not the dreaded march of doom, but another far more upbeat. Normally she'd be pleased to hear The Foundations belt out "Build Me Up, Buttercup." Today, she cringed as she answered it.

"Hey, Brontë," she chirped as if she hadn't a care in the world. "What's up?"

"Is there something you want to tell me, Ginny?"

Passive-aggressiveness. The truest expression of the sisterly bond.

She took a pause, pretending to think about it. "Nope, not really."

"Nothing?" her sister stressed the word with abundant doubt.

"Nothing about a few things that have gone missing from my room?"

Ginny grimaced. What did she expect? Though she'd only been gone for a morning and afternoon in this time, it was long enough to notice something so obvious. In her defense, her original plan had been to be back before that happened. "Nothing you'd be happy to hear."

She could picture Brontë throwing her hands into the air. "Geez, Gin, are you kidding me? Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

Did Brontë?

"Have you been talking to Donell?"

"No, should I?" There was a pause. "Wait, how do you know about Donell?"

With no moral high ground to stand on, Ginny rushed ahead to avoid that conversation. What Brontë didn't know wouldn't hurt her. "Listen, sis, I messed up a teeny, tiny little thing but I'm going to fix it."

"Fix it? Fix what? Wait, where are you?"

"In the middle of nowhere for now, but not for long. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Gin, you have no idea what could be waiting for you out there." Brontë's voice descended with each word until it was a near whisper filled with worry. "Tell me where you are. Tris and I will come and help you."

"I'm fine. How do they say it here? Dinnae fash, lass, I got this." She forced optimism into the assurance. "I wouldn't mind knowing more about Donell though. What's his deal? Something about fixing the future? I thought he was going to blow a gasket when I spoke with him." Male voices rose through the phone. Ginny pulled it away from her ear and stared down at it for a moment as if she could see through it to the other side. She listened again. Were they arguing? "Is that

him? Is he there?"

"Ginny..."

A chill chased down Ginny's spine. A shudder of dismay more profound than any a mere ringtone could summon. Her feel-good moment slipped away. "Ohmigod, is that Luke?"

The voices muted in the background as if Brontë moved to another room or cupped her hand around the phone. "He showed up here looking for you. Did you know he was coming?"

"I don't even know how he knew I was in Scotland." Anxiety stiffened her pace until it felt like she was walking on wooden legs. "Brontë, I'm sorry...I can't. I had to get away."

"What happened between you two? You never said. I mean, he doesn't look happy, Gin."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry you have to be the one to...deal." She drew in a shaky breath, blinking away the sudden sting of tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to get away. Go somewhere he couldn't find me."

"Where are you, Ginny? Where did you go? Tell me so I can find you."

"I'm sorry."

Ginny clicked off the call and hastened her pace. Luke was here. In Scotland. Right at Granny's front door. How had he known where to go? How did he always manage to find her? A hot splash dampened her cheek. She swiped it away and walked faster. Anxiety twisted in her gut, turning her delicious meal sour. Her stomach knotted and bile rose in her throat. Dropping to her knees, she lost all she'd eaten. Gagged and sobbing at the same time, she let it all out. The angst, the anger. Would she never be allowed to be happy again?

Her phone rang again. She sent it to voicemail and climbed to her feet. Best to turn it off so it couldn't be tracked or even travel back to 1746 right now, but she needed that map with the pin drop to put her back right at the spot from where she'd left. As superb as her memory was, one hill after the next rolling hill in this part of Scotland looked much like the next. There wasn't a river or even the tiniest trickle of a stream to follow back.

She needed it.

She needed to get away as fast as she could.

Time had been on her side before, now every minute worked against her. Washing her mouth with a swish of coffee, she spit it out and began to run. A steady jog north. She forced herself to focus on the ground in front of her, to watch for obstacles rather than imagine what her ex-husband was doing at this moment. The last thing she needed was to break an ankle right now.

She cut her travel time in half. The moment the cottage ruin came



into sight, she said screw it, and dialed back the device to the approximate moment she left. The journey took a blink of an eye and left her stomach churning, though it could not begin to compare to what Luke could do to her.

“Ginny?” Ahead, MacLeod exited the stable scratching his head as he looked around. “Lass, where are ye?”

Handsome, stubborn, sexy, insufferable...right now, he looked like heaven.

## Chapter 15

*April 18, 1746*

“We’ll go southwest from here until we reach Loch Arkaig, ’tis no’ much farther,” Coll summed up the plan. “Follow the northern shore then overland to the west. Angus MacEachine has a wee sheal house south of Loch Morar near Meoble. We can rest there.”

Burke nodded, his expression grim. “’Twill be rough going. Nae roads, aye? No’ even a footpath to follow.”

“Aye, but given the locations of the royalist outposts, we hivnae much choice in the matter,” Coll told him and looked to Charles Edward. “That’s it then. Yer highness?”

The prince inclined his head. “If Miss Hughes has nothing to add?”

Coll turned to Ginny, where she sat near the fireplace, knees drawn up to her chest and huddled in the folds of her cloak. She appeared mesmerized by the flames. Lost. Something was amiss. He’d gone to retrieve her after observing the “moment” she required only to have her run to him from the opposite direction. Not only run *to* him but fling her arms around him as if she....

Och, he didn’t have the slightest idea why she’d clung to him the way a wee bairn clasped a treasured doll to their chest when awakened from a troubling dream. An embrace both desperate and endearing. As if he were the anchor in the storm. That sudden change of mood from one minute to the next made no sense.

Nor had there been time to have her explain it to him. Not that he would have expected an honest answer. That would be as absurd as him admitting how he feared for her safety when he’d been unable to locate her that morning. An admission of the jeopardy that surrounded them.

“Ginny? Lass?” He put a hand on her shoulder to recall her from her thoughts and frowned when she flinched under his touch. “Charles Edward would like to ken if ye’ve anything to add?”

She shook her head but before she could speak, the door of the cottage opened with a bang. For a moment, he feared the redcoats had caught up with them but it was Aeneas MacDonald. A surprise, since they’d left him behind at Invergarry.

He bowed to the prince. “A message arrived for ye, yer highness. From Lord Murray.”

With a scowl, Charles Edward took the missive and opened it. For an instant, he brightened. "Huzzah, Lord Lochiel has survived, though I'd feared he'd perished. His clansmen carried him off the battlefield and hid in a crofter's cottage. It was only by the grace of God that troops searching for them were called away before they entered and discovered them." A frown descended then. "He writes that Cumberland seeks all fugitives from the battle, allowing no quarter and no mercy to those they encounter. He has become a butcher of the Highlanders."

The prince lowered the letter and stared at Ginny with wonder, as did they all, though she was lost to her thoughts and paid them no mind. "He wrote that word?" Coll clarified. "Butcher?"

Charles Edward wasn't listening. His eyes were glued to the missive, his finger tracing the words. "How could I have foreseen this slaughter? Such devastation."

"Sire?" O'Sullivan prompted. "What else does he say?"

Recalled to the moment, the prince scanned the rest of the message, his countenance cloudier by the moment. "Lord Murray accuses me of bad faith." His eyes skimmed downward. "Bad faith for what seems my every action since stepping foot in this land! Had I met him at Ruthven, I would have no doubt led Cumberland right to them all."

"He colors ye as the betrayer when it is he who has betrayed ye, yer highness," O'Sullivan assured him. "Who is to say royalist agents are not tracking this missive? He could be leading them straight to ye as the Scots once betrayed Charles I to the enemy."

The Irishman never ceased to feed Charles Edward's paranoia and turn the prince against his own countrymen. "Enough of yer poison," Coll growled. "Ye ken nothing of the true Jacobites, those who would lay down their lives for Charles Edward. And those who have." He turned to the prince. "Sir, ye ken Murray is ever yer devoted servant. He shares yer greatest desire, ye ken this. 'Tis nothing more than the rantings of a broken heart in those pages."

"His is not the only heart broken," the prince sniffed. "Have we not dallied until all hope of rallying our forces is gone?"

"Ye need to make him aware of yer intentions," Coll told him, unwilling to address the question directly. "Yer plans for the future."

O'Sullivan started to talk, however Coll cut him off with a dark look.

The prince conceded the point and called for a quill and parchment. "I will compose such a letter, then we will continue our journey."

As he wrote, Coll joined the rest of the men for a simple meal of milk and curds. Filling another bowl, he took it to Ginny who looked

down at it and wrinkled her nose.

"No, thank you."

"Ye need sustenance, lass. We've a long trek ahead of us."

"I'm fine." She summoned a tight smile. "Thank you though."

By the time the horses were readied, the prince had finished his letter. He handed it off to MacDonald with the instruction to return to Invergarry and see that Strickland deliver it into Lord Murray's hands.

"Have him carry this message to the men as well," he instructed. "Let every man seek his safety in the best way he can."

\* \* \*

Coll had constructed a makeshift pillion of blankets and her cloak for Ginny to ride behind him rather than bear the torment of her nestled against his groin through another protracted night in the saddle, teased for hours by the scent of her hair and the more erotic fragrance of woman. It never crossed his mind that her brittle posture of the previous two nights would be anything but. Nor that she would melt against him thus. Arms looped around his midsection, her cheek rested against his shoulder. Worse, her bountiful breasts pressed against his back, soft and warm.

Combined with her intermittent sighs, he would have been driven to distraction if not for the encumbrance of his troubled thoughts.

"You're as stiff as a board this morning," she said. "What's bothering you?"

Had he been as obvious as she? "One might ask the same of ye."

"Me? I'm a ray of sunshine. How could I not be? It's a gorgeous day. The skies are blue, the hills rolling, and the scent of heather fills the air."

However honest the assessment of their surroundings—how often he'd failed to appreciate what was outside his own doorstep himself—her tone bore an underlying bitterness even a fool could discern.

"Yer mood is ever buoyant, lass," he teased in effort to lighten her mood.

"So glad you finally noticed." Though he sensed a smile in the words, they were punctuated by another sigh. "My troubles revolve around the million things that could go wrong here. But that's not what's bothering you."

"Nay, it isnae." The need to unburden himself was undeniable. While he'd never imagined hers as a ready ear, he wasn't quite prepared to bare his soul to her. "How did ye ken Cumberland's butchery?"

"Back to that, are we?" She sighed yet again. "To be honest, I was there at Culloden before I made my way to Urquhart Castle. I saw most of the battle. Highlanders who retreated on the road to Inverness were run down and skewered. More were slain while they slept.

Others were burned alive in the cottages they hid in.”

“I dinnae ken.” Nor did Charles Edward. He couldn’t imagine how she could. Even so, he believed her. There was a solemn veracity in her confession, even if her description seemed a tad detached, as if she were reading it from a newsheet. Had anyone been witness to such a bloodbath, he supposed they would do whatever they could to distance themselves from the memory. Even those without a memory as powerful as hers. As he had. He wished he could see her face and gauge for himself if she were as haunted as he by the events of that day. “Lass, I—”

“Enough about me. Tell me what’s really bothering you.”

Coll stunned himself by doing as she asked. “It’s Prince Charles Edward.”

“Not surprising. I can tell you dislike him.”

“I dinnae dislike him,” he denied. In truth, he didn’t know the prince well enough to form a personal opinion on the man. “I’m disappointed by the outcome of our venture.”

“To clarify, that being the treasonous rebellion against England?”

A smile lifted his lips at her teasing then faded under the weight of his frustration. “Nay, ’tis this message he sent instructing those who fought under his banner to seek their own safety. Every man for himself.” He shook his head. “I can only imagine what they will think when they hear it. That he abandoned them? Left them to Cumberland’s mercy? Och, and so he has.”

Her arms tightened around him. “Disillusioned by someone they admired and trusted completely? I know exactly how that feels.”

Ginny wasn’t referring to the Jacobite alone. Coll could feel it.

“Why would he do it?” he wondered aloud. “Leave them all behind to save his own skin?”

“Sounds like you no longer think he’s God’s chosen servant.”

“I never did,” he admitted the almost heretical opinion aloud for the first time. And to her of all people rather than those closest to him! “There are many who fought because they believe the prince and his father have been denied their divine right to the throne. Many more fought to see a Catholic Stuart in power.”

“What motivated you then?”

The insightful question seized something in the region of his heart. If only his father had asked such questions rather than condemning Coll’s choices without seeking to understand him. The past year might have passed with more than the rare letter from his mother relaying his father’s dissatisfaction.

“I supported the Jacobite ideology from a more nationalist perspective. Wi’out Charles Edward, there is nae hope of Scotland retaining even the smallest measure of sovereignty. That is an

intolerable outcome after all his countrymen have sacrificed in his service. And to abandon them at the midnight hour?" He shook his head. "I cannae understand it."

"You could ask him."

A bark of incredulous laughter escaped him. "Interrogate the prince for his motives?"

"Why not?" She shifted and he felt her chin on his shoulder. He turned his head to look at her. "Can you imagine the burden of being Bonny Prince Charlie? He's probably on the verge of an existential crisis, if he's not already in the middle of one. Five minutes ago, he thought himself invincible. Now he's responsible for every life and every death. Who would blame him for questioning the role he's played in it all? He basically willed the destruction of thousands of men, and I bet he knows it. Do you think he'd want to face those remaining and count heads?"

Coll took a moment to digest her observations. "Mayhap, but to believe any of those men betrayed him and our cause is madness."

"Or, doing so lets him shed some of the responsibility for it," she said. "At least in his own mind, it takes the end result out of his control, right? It's easier to believe he was betrayed or to blame his lower numbers in soldiers or gunnery, the terrain, the weather, or poor morale...."

"Rather than his own incompetence?" he added wryly.

"I would say, rather than admit he failed as a leader."

He shook off the idea "It cannae be as simple as that. I would wager he does not regret our loss so much as he does his failure in Cumberland's eyes."

"That's a ruthless assessment." He felt her shrug. "If you don't like my rationale, ask for his. He might appreciate a little honesty."

Another burst of amusement welled up in him. He patted her hands clasped around him. "I dinnae think honesty is what he wants, lass."

"Thank you for that figurative pat on the head. Should I return to the kitchen next?" She turned her hand and caught his, twisting his thumb back just enough for him to feel the pinch before she released him.

"I dinnae mean to belittle ye. Ye're a canny lass indeed," he assured her. "Nevertheless, in my experience, royals tend to prefer the counsel of men like O'Sullivan there. The prince may claim to dislike sycophants, yet he surrounds himself with them. 'Tis pure clatty."

"Yes, I heard enough of their conversation to get a pretty clear picture. Some of the stuff he says is ridiculous. It's obvious the prince isn't stupid. I can't believe he doesn't see right through O'Sullivan's bullshit."

Coll huffed at the curious word. "Bullshit?"

"Nonsense," she corrected. "We have a lot of interesting euphemisms in the Colonies." She eased away from him and Coll looked over his shoulder to see mischief dancing in the eyes that met his. "Your use of sycophant, for example. Where I come from we have another word for people like him."

"Aye, and what's that?"

"Ass kissers."

Ginny smiled then, impish and engaging. The first full blown gesture of genuine humor Coll had yet to witness from her. The power of it lifted his own spirits until they shared the smile together.

"Ye're off yer heid, ye ken that?"

She shook her head with an impish purse of her lips. "Of course, I don't *know* it. A cracked person is always the last one to know they're cracked. Look at Bonny Prince Charlie. Why, I doubt he has any idea at all."

They dissolved into mutual good humor that swept away the remainder of his worries. Again, she squeezed his waist...no, hugged him as her shoulders shook with laughter.

"Why do ye refer to him as such?" he asked after their amusement eventually waned. "He is Prince Charles Edward Stuart, no' Prince Charlie," his voice rose to feminine mimicry. "There were some women who referred to him as such when he first arrived in Edinburgh. They dropped their handkerchiefs at his feet, giggled and swooned. 'Twas nae more than a lark."

"I think it's going to have a bit more longevity than you think." This time her hand turned to embrace his. Her touch was warm, exhilarating. "You'll have to trust me on that."

"Because ye're a seer?" he asked with no hint of mockery in the allegation.

"Yes, Ginny knows all."

He couldn't help but note the gravity in the teasing words.

## Chapter 16

*Near Arisaig, Scotland  
Present Day*

Ginny wrapped herself in a fluffy white robe and poured a glass of wine. A reward for enduring the hardships of the past few days. She'd learned a new Scottish word since leaving the Cameron cottage. In fact, she'd spent over twelve hours straight having its meaning embedded in her body and manifested in the blisters on her feet. *Braes*. Steep hillsides. Plural, as in many. Superimposed one over the next as far as the eye could see. They'd seemed so picturesque from a distance. Dreamlike.

In reality, they were a nightmare.

The Braes of Morar. Mountains was more like it. The topography of the region was so inhospitable, they'd been forced to leave their horses behind and proceed on foot. While O'Sullivan had complained for his own benefit, Prince Charlie had protested on her behalf saying they couldn't expect a lady to walk, especially across such rugged terrain.

Naturally, the prince's men agreed with him. Only MacLeod had looked her up and down and dismissed the chivalrous, if somewhat sexist, appraisal.

"Dinnae fash, yer highness. The lass can manage it."

His stalwart faith warmed her through, if only because she was unused to such verbal support. Thankfully, she was able to validate his support by making a good showing for herself. She'd kept up and done so with minimal outward effort.

During those initial hours of their upward climb, she'd enjoyed the vigorous exercise. As a girl, she'd often gone backpacking and camping with her dad at Whiteface Mountain and Saranac Six trails in New York. It had been a hobby she carried into adulthood, thus her three-day hike from Glasgow to Inverness along the popular West Highland and Great Glen Ways when she'd first arrived in Scotland, otherwise known as her delay tactic to avoid going straight to Granny's house. Again, walking had an added benefit, at least at the start. The effort cleared her mind and eased away the anxiety her conversation with Brontë had brought on. After a couple of hours, her restless mind roamed. Reminded of another hasty escape through the mountains when the von Trapp family crossed the Alps between



Austria and Switzerland and sang the single chorus she knew from “Climb Ev’ry Mountain” under her breath to pass the time.

Once the sun set, Burke lit a lantern as if that narrow radius of light could illuminate some invisible path through the mountains only he and MacLeod could see. From time to time, they spotted the glow of campfires in the valleys below. Burke would douse their light so they would not stand out as beacons in the night as their enemies did. It was an understandable precaution, as the reason they’d taken this perilous route in the dead of night was to avoid detection. On the other hand, with all the twists and turns, ups and downs of their expedition, Ginny couldn’t figure out how, without a compass, MacLeod and Burke knew east from west as they conferred over the best direction to take. Even with a lantern to light the way, new pitfalls and dangers presented themselves with each step. Steep inclines were studded with rocks that jutted out of the tall grass. Higher still there was no grass at all beneath their feet, only unpredictable terrain that resulted in more than one curse and hiss of pain when someone tripped or fell.

Less that threat of injury, less the urgency of their mission...less the twelve-hour walk coming on the heels of the five miles she’d already walked that morning, Ginny would have enjoyed the route they took. She could have done without the skirts, as well. And the stays.

She also wished there was light enough to view the roughhewn panorama around them. For all its lack of civilization—or perhaps, because of it—this region was a hiker’s paradise. She would have loved to see the Three Munros with the snowcapped peak of Sgùrr na Ciche rising above its fraternal mountains somewhere north of them from this perspective. It would have made the burning in her thighs worth it.

They took only one brief rest during the hellacious trek and then only to gobble down the few oatcakes they carried with them. Ginny couldn’t imagine what they’d been thinking to not anticipate the provisions they’d need for an expedition such as this! Overall, they seemed immune to the fact that their lives were at risk by something far more profound than starvation. Unable to live on oatcakes alone, she broke open the shortbread tin and shared them with the others. Though she was tempted to keep the rest of her stash in case of emergency, she decided the strenuous activity was reason enough to break the remaining meat pies into pieces and shared them as well though the meager meal was hardly enough to sustain them.

She poured the last of her bottled water into her thermos and passed it around. In the dark, no one questioned the curious container. And thankfully MacLeod had been too exhausted to note the

mysterious reappearance of her canvas bag. In fact, she got thanks all around along with a dose of acceptance among them. There truly was no better way to a man's heart than through his stomach.

"How did ye come by such treats?" MacLeod asked her.

Ginny gave him a wink. "What? You didn't see all this coming?"

His burst of laughter had warmed her. The genuine smile on his lips had done something else entirely. Her awareness of his presence elevated a notch. The way he walked, the heat of his body. The touch of his hand on her elbow as he steadied her while she lifted her skirts to climb a steep incline.

The sky had just begun to lighten at their backs when they began their descent into the glen below. Exhaustion that had been nipping at her heels for hours washed over her. Over them all, if their lagging pace was any indication. When her foot slipped over some loose rock, she slid down the hillside with a surprised squeal. MacLeod caught her arm before Ginny could slalom downward on her ass.

He kept her hand in his the remainder of the way down. She accepted his assistance trying not to read anything more into the gesture. Or to consider too deeply how that simple touch stirred a disproportionate level of longing. Honestly, she was too tired to indulge in her usual over-evaluation. She'd always considered herself to be the outdoorsy type. However, she wasn't the "ride two days straight then walk for an ungodly amount of time through rough mountain passes" level of outdoorsy. Thank God she'd had her boots rather than those flats of Brontë's.

"Tis no' much farther," he murmured for her ears only. "Ye've done well, lass. I'm proud of ye."

The compliment shouldn't have meant anything to Ginny.

Yet somehow, it did.

Sipping her wine, she went to the window and looked out. They hadn't traveled all the way into Arisaig, a village of tidy white buildings with black roofs on the eastern shore of Loch Nan Ceall. Their actual destination had been Borrodale House, a large manor of similar styling a few miles farther east on the northern shore of Loch Nan Uamh. This entire region where Prince Charlie landed in Scotland and eventually made his escape—prior to her mucking about in history—was a popular tourist destination with landmarks like the Loch Nan Uamh viaduct and Prince's Cairn.

One a tribute to his cause, now a memorial to his defeat.

And for Ginny, a respite from the physical hardships of the past.

She'd taken a chance there would be a hotel nearby in her time for her to pamper herself. As luck would have it, there were several, including this Victorian-era manor built long after 1746 and now a quaint inn with a tavern next door to provide her with wine, a dessert

of sticky toffee pudding, and an available room with a view of the loch.

Out of sight hadn't led to out of mind. Centuries between them and she couldn't stop thinking about MacLeod and the impact of those few words.

*I'm proud of ye, lass.*

It had been a long time since she'd heard those words or seen them reflected in a man's eyes. Ginny knew she was placing more significance upon them than MacLeod intended, just as she had when he'd assured the other men she could manage the hike with such confidence. He'd probably meant the compliment as nothing more than another pat on the head. His certainty that she could walk, more of an expectation as there was no other choice. That didn't matter.

What did matter was the fact that he hadn't amended his praise with a "but" or a "however" or some other modifier. If it had been Luke, it would have been something like "I'm proud of you...but you should have been able to do another three miles" or "I'm proud of you...especially since you're so clumsy" or "I'm proud of you...or would be if I hadn't had to help you."

She'd never really understood what gaslighting was, even in the months after her marriage. Or to acknowledge it for the mental abuse it was. If she succeeded in any way, even when she received her master's degree, Luke's congratulations were grudging. He questioned her knowledge, questioned how she knew anything. Dismissed it when it didn't suit him. If there was something she couldn't do, it was because she was "just a little girl." If she could, it was because women were given advantages men didn't have. His disdain suffused her life. His humor was always at her expense, as was his anger.

It had taken too long for her to acknowledge how he belittled her. Diminished her, who she was and who she could be again. Without him.

It would be a cold day in hell before she went back to a life like that. And farther into the inferno still before she fell for another man who treated her to more of the same.

There'd been no hanging "but" from MacLeod. He meant what he said. He said what he felt, direct and sincere, whether it stung or not. It had been years since she'd been around someone who made her feel good about herself. Like a woman starved for approval, hungry for warmth, she wanted more of the same.

Ginny didn't understand herself right now. As much as she'd wanted to run away from MacLeod in the beginning, she'd been undeniably drawn to him ever since. It could be attributed to her need to save the men's lives, except she didn't feel the same way about Prince Charlie or the others. Only MacLeod. She was surprised by the

way her heart had leapt when she spotted him after her return from the future. Her first impulse had been to run to him, to hug him.

She didn't understand him, either. He'd displayed concern for her welfare even when he had no cause to, even when he did not benefit from it. He'd provided caring and comfort with no questions when she'd clung to him as she had. Or vocal ones, at least. Maybe he was trying to kill her with kindness or earn her trust to somehow woo information out of her or blindside her with some other ulterior motive in mind. She didn't believe that was the case.

The dynamic between them had shifted from suspicion to tentative friendship. It could have been the confidences they shared or more basically, from her perspective, that he'd proven himself a far kinder man than the one she'd left behind.

Aside from their rough start, MacLeod had shown himself to be a patriot and a gentleman in mind as well as in action. Bore national pride despite the Scottish defeat. He was loyal even when that loyalty was strained by grief. Even if he hadn't consciously acknowledged it, MacLeod was among the disillusioned of Prince Charlie's followers. She could only imagine how it must pain him to have the foundation of everything he'd fought for crumble beneath his feet. Despite that, he continued to put his life on the line in this endeavor to see the prince to safety. Ginny had no doubt he would trade his life for the prince's without hesitation.

She couldn't let that happen. She wouldn't.

That fierce spurt of protectiveness had been disconcerting, and a portion of what prompted this temporary return to the future. A break from the close contact that was assuredly prompting her abnormal response to him. It wasn't working. She could replay every word, worry over every reaction, but deep down she couldn't deny it. For whatever reason, she decided she liked him. His humor. His caring demeanor—which admittedly, she hadn't had much of recently. He stirred something in her that had been untouched for so long. Too long.

Maybe it was the fact that a manly man such as MacLeod harbored feelings and doubts he wasn't afraid to share. Even in her time when it was more common for men to share their emotions, they didn't tend to expose their vulnerable side.

Maybe he'd come to like her, too.

Maybe it was pure loneliness on her part.

*Or maybe you're crushing hard, Gin.*

A knock at the door made her jump farther than the mental leap her thoughts had just taken. She opened it to find the innkeeper there with an inquisitive smile on her round face. "Here's the charger ye asked for, Miss Hughes. I also wanted to let ye ken personally that yer

laundry will be ready first thing in the morning.”

As she had before, Ginny blithely ignored the raging curiosity about her clothing. There were no reasonable answers she could provide on that front anyway. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Reid. I truly appreciate it.”

“There’s a charming clothing store down in the village if ye had need of more garments,” she pressed. “I could gi’ ye directions.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.” Ginny summoned a bland but polite smile and bade her goodnight before closing the door to more questions.

Plugging in her phone, she ignored the incoming messages and notifications and opened her maps app to view the route they’d traveled from another perspective. After they left MacEachine’s house, they’d crossed the relatively short six miles here to Borrodale House, a property owned by the MacDonalds of Clanranald near the coast of Loch Nan Uamh. After a meal of lamb, bread, and butter—the first true meal she’d had in days—the men began making their plans for the crossing to France.

That’s what she should be doing rather than stressing over MacLeod. Making plans. Problem was, she didn’t know precisely when the redcoats would take Prince Charlie down. All internet searches boiled it down to “captured outside Arisaig in an attempt to escape to France.” Nothing helpful. A proper guardian angel would be scouting the area or doing some research instead of skipping town to luxuriate in a hot bath and chill in the company of a bottle of wine.

Ginny clicked off her phone but left it on the charger. She had no desire to be woken every five minutes all night long. She was so worn out she felt decades older than she was. The bath had helped. What she needed was a good night’s sleep.

What she desired was another thing entirely.

Climbing off the bed, she carried her glass to the window and stared out over the lake as she drank. The setting sun sparkled off the undulating surface. The western sky ablaze with brilliant layers of orange, red, a dark line of purple where water met land. It wasn’t even close to the best thing she’d seen that day.

Just after dawn that morning, they’d arrived at the home of someone named MacEachine. It was nothing more than a shack on the edge of the wood, not big enough to house them all. Too tired to care, she’d curled up in a nest of ferns in the forest and fell asleep without even a thought for food.

She’d awoken warm and cozy, MacLeod’s hard body spooned behind her. His arms were bound tight around her, face buried in the crook of her shoulder. Amid the veil between sleep and consciousness, she’d snuggled into his embrace. That surreal, almost alien sense of

safety and security jogged her to full awareness. Rolling on to her back, she watched his face as he woke. There'd been pleasure in his dark hooded eyes. A sleepy smile touched the corner of his lips.

For a split second, life was beautiful. As gorgeous as he.

He'd come to his senses a minute later and apologized for being there. He explained that he'd noticed her shivering and had only intended to warm her.

Obviously, it wouldn't do to read more into his praise and actions than he'd intended. Nor could she misconstrue anything else he said or did simply because the experience was a novel one for her.

Rationalizing didn't help.

A long, hot bath meant to ease away her aches and pains had only left her with a different ache. The sort that sparked fantasies that begged to be fulfilled. She eyed the broad expanse of the canopied bed she intended to sleep in tonight and was forced to acknowledge the fact, that if given the choice, she wouldn't sleep in it alone.

This unwilling, tenacious attraction had taken a sharp turn from inappropriate to disconcerting. It shouldn't have come as such a shock, if she were being honest. MacLeod was a man who could have women falling at his feet in any time. Any woman would wilt under that hot chocolaty gaze and appreciate his physicality enough to want to explore all that was hidden beneath that kilt.

And really, what else could one expect after days of sitting on those rock-hard thighs?

It was a natural, healthy...growing desire, and it had been months since she'd shared an intimate relationship with something that didn't run on batteries.

She longed for affection, connection, and frankly, a little copulation.

Whatever had brought her here—be it fate...destiny...her own self-involved idiocy—was there any valid reason not to embrace these fantastic circumstances and take it where she could find it?

She could take what she longed for—the personal closeness missing in her life, the intimacy—and share it in equal measure.

With him.

Did she stand a chance? Realistically, he was far out of her league.

Ginny set aside her glass and moved to look at herself in the tall, cheval mirror in the corner of her room where she tried to study herself objectively. Masses of blah brown hair and far too many freckles. Her eyes were pretty, though. Even with that genetic perk, she knew she wasn't as striking as Brontë or as boldly beautiful as their sister Jane. Her ex had nailed that point home more than once. She'd been lucky to land a guy like Luke in the first place. A glitch in the natural order.

Tugging on the ends of her robe ties, she sucked in her gut. As physically active as she was, an extra ten to twenty pounds clung tenaciously to her hips and thighs, resisting her every effort to shed them. Objectively, her boobs were nice with enough curve to balance out the bottom.

It didn't alter the overall effect. She was girl-next-door pretty and she knew it. No amount of exercise, spray tans, or bleached hair could change that fact.

Then again, some guys reputedly liked the girl next door, didn't they?

A sweet ache of longing clenched her chest. Maybe she could fan the flame of that little spark between them into something more. If nothing else, a lonely soldier shouldn't be difficult to seduce. Right?

Flopping back on the bed, she stared up at the canopy. All she saw was MacLeod. Ugh, a thousand fantasies and she didn't even know his first name!

"Stop stressing about it, you crazy woman," she told herself. "If you want him, get at it! What's the worst that could happen?"

Dwelling on it kept her tossing and turning long into the night.

## Chapter 17

*Borrodale House, Scotland  
April 20, 1746*

“There ye are.” Coll had never seen a woman look as guilty as Ginny did as she jumped in surprise and spun around to face him. Her cheeks flushed with bright, becoming color though she refused to meet his eye. “I told ye I’d find ye wherever ye went, did I no’?”

“I let you find me. Not the same thing.”

“Did ye? Looked to me as though ye were trying to sneak away wi’out anyone seeing ye.”

Though he merely meant to tease, her color deepened. Had he stumbled upon the truth? Had she truly been about to slip away and leave them behind? Not that he would blame her. The peril they faced, particularly that he’d encumbered her with, weighed upon him.

He should never have put her in this position.

“As a matter of fact, I was returning to Borrodale House, not running from it.” Reaching into the bag she carried, she retrieved an item wrapped in white linen and held it out to him. “Here. I brought this back for you. A peace offering.”

“Are we at war?” The bundle was warm in his hand. He opened it find a trio of scones. They smelled of butter, sugar, and home. His mouth watered. What was it they said about the quickest route to a man’s heart being through his stomach?

“I figured you might be as tired of oatcakes as I am,” she said as he bit into one. “I hope you like currants.”

If he hadn’t before, he did now. He hadn’t eaten anything so delightful or comforting in a long while. He finished them off as Ginny smiled indulgently. “Delicious. Thank ye. Where did ye find them?”

“A little shop in the village.”

His heart clenched for a different reason. “Ye walked all the way to Arisaig?”

“It’s only a few miles.” Her shoulder lifted in a blasé shrug.

Aye, to a village with an active port filled with boats and a dozen opportunities to leave them all behind. He still couldn’t reason out why she lingered. “Why no’ leave while ye had the chance?”

“I have a compelling reason to stay.”

The simple explanation kicked Coll in the gut before he shuffled off the pleasure the words infused him with. Naturally, she was



speaking of Charles Edward, of his continued safety and security. It wasn't Coll who compelled her to stay, not now or back at Invergarry Castle. With that hint of a bashful smile on her sweet lips, however, it was easy for him to imagine her motivations quite differently. That blush on her freshly scrubbed cheeks....

His gaze swept over her from head to toe absorbing the almost imperceptible changes between the time he'd escorted her to her assigned chamber the previous evening and now. "Ye look remarkably fresh this morn. Have yer clothes been laundered?"

The morning breeze lifted strands of her lustrous, tousled hair. Without thinking, he reached out thinking to brush it back from her cheek. Instead, he rubbed the silky lock between his fingers and lifted to his nose. As fragrant as a field of heather in spring. "Ye had a bath."

She looked as guilty as sin when she shrugged the observation away. "I took a dip in the loch last night. I'm not used to going days on end without bathing."

The tidal waters of Loch Nan Uamh had never left anyone smelling so fine. More likely she'd bribed one of MacDonald's servants and was hesitant to bring trouble down upon them. Though rather envious of her ingenuity, he'd let her have her secrets.

"Tis truth ye dinnae ken ye're mad, lass," he teased instead. "The water maun be cold. Do ye no' ken ye could catch a deadly chill wi' such madness?"

"I thought we agreed I'm not entirely mad."

"Nay," he shot back. "Only that ye're no' aware of yer madness."

"Oh, that's right."

She was, in fact, rather delightful.

It had been a long while since he'd enjoyed a person's company more.

"Since ye found it so enjoyable, I may have to join ye next time."

Ginny's full lips parted. Her shaky inhale and wide-eyed stare skewed Coll's thoughts sideways. In a flash he imagined her stripping down and joining him for a midnight swim. He'd finally see those bountiful curves as God intended them, take her in his arms and let the current swirl around them under the moonless sky. Together they'd raise the water temperature of the loch by several degrees—

He snapped back to reality, cursing his suddenly shoogly knees. Bugger it all, she'd gone from haunting his dreams to consuming his waking hours as well. Granted, they were far better images than those that normally filled his mind, however inconvenient.

The lass was no help in banishing the wayward fantasy. She smiled up at him as provocative as a she-devil at the crossroads. "I might have to take you up on that offer."

The suggestive proposal came as a surprise. Something had

changed in Ginny. Between them. What was once no more than a contentious battle of wills had surrendered to a cautious truce. Beyond that to something akin to friendship with a hint of flirtation. Coll found the combination enchanting if not puzzling.

He could pinpoint the precise moment her mood shifted. When he'd been searching for her at Cameron's cottage, thinking she'd had a change of heart and abandoned them, only to have her run *to* him instead of away from him.

It wasn't a question of when it had happened so much as why.

He had no idea what occurred in such a short amount of time to cue that evolution from adversary to ally. Without foundation, he couldn't help but think that she'd fled something else, something far less preferable than his company. Ever since then, she'd been quieter, softer. More cooperative. In turn, he attempted to do the same, feeding kindness with kindness. Her amiability with his own.

He hadn't expected his growing desire to be met in kind.

There had been an ember of it when she'd awoken in his arms the previous afternoon, though thankfully she'd seemed oblivious to his raging erection at the time. Here it was again in her alluring smile. He could kiss her lush lips and be welcome. Touch her and be touched in turn. Rekindle that flicker of passion from days ago and watch it go up in flames. Coll longed for that fire, wanted it to consume him.

Through another restless night he'd lain awake knowing she slept in the next room, imagining all they could do together to burn the misery of the past year from his mind. From the ashes, anticipation, rather than dread for the days and years ahead, might rise like a phoenix.

As if a night of passion could rewrite his enthusiasm for life itself. Coll scoffed at the barmy thought. Intercourse was no life-altering undertaking. Earth shattering, perhaps, but not so consequential.

Och, he'd gone soft in the head. Nothing more than the musings of a man who'd gone too long without a lass in his bed. If she could read his thoughts, Ginny would be in her rights to flee from him in truth. As it was, she merely continued to smile, likely unaware of its effect on him.

Her gaze shifted to his lips and the effect went straight to his groin. "Um, you have a bit of..."

The soft whisper of her finger along the corner of his mouth was almost too much to bear. He caught her hand to push her away and found himself brushing his lips over her fingertips. Her sweet gasp only stoked the fire growing in him.

With a strained laugh, she pulled away. "You know I don't even know your name? I'm curious, it wouldn't be Connor, would it? Connor MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod?"

Her words teased though he couldn't determine why. "Nay."

"What is it then?" She touched his hand, no more. He felt as though the appendage were held to an open flame. "Seems in a moment like this that MacLeod isn't quite right."

Underlying sensuality laced her voice, and though he cleared his throat before speaking, his was as gruff. "'Tis Cailin, or Coll if it pleases ye."

"Coll." His name was honey on her lips.

Would that she call it out in passion. Beg him for more...

"Ah, there you are, MacLeod!"

They leapt apart as Charles Edward strode down the lawn with the MacDonald of Clanranald, MacEachine, and Burke in his wake. The men carried several long muskets minus the bayonets that adorned them in battle. Coll couldn't help but wonder where the prince's toady of an Irishman was.

Not toady. Nay, ass kisser.

The appellation suited O'Sullivan far better.

"Our host informed me as we broke our fast that a sizable roe had been sighted in the area."

"A bull stag," MacDonald corrected in a booming voice. "A magnificent beast that has eluded my gamekeeper for nigh unto a year now."

"We're to go stalking," the prince informed them. "The others loll about in their beds but I knew you would be up and equal to the task. You do not mind, do you, Miss Hughes?"

Not only did the prince want him to stalk an elusive deer when Coll's feet were still sore and blistered from the walking they'd done these past days, he wanted him to leave Ginny behind just as their exchange was becoming interesting.

"I fear gunshot might attract unwanted attention, yer highness," he said in effort to quash the enterprise entirely.

"Nonsense," Charles Edward dismissed his excuse. "MacDonald assures me there's been no sign of government troops in the area. And I feel the need for some lighthearted sport after days of excessive worries."

A royal's prerogative.

"As ye wish, yer highness. Perhaps the lady would like to join us as well," Coll heard himself say and justified it with the knowledge that a day with her on his arm would be far more pleasant than one in the prince's company.

Burke signaled his accord with a low grunt while the prince, MacDonald, and MacEachine chuckled merrily at the suggestion. "Hunting is no sport for ladies."

"On the contrary, I would be happy to join your highness," Ginny

surprised them all by saying. "It is a lovely morning to be out and about if nothing else."

As it had many times before, she modulated her speech in addressing the prince. She didn't merely guard her tongue, she minded her tone and accent. The overall effect was cultured and pleasant to the ear. Nevertheless, Coll was finding that he far preferred the tart intonation and comfortable conversation they shared.

"It is!" Charles Edward nodded, his smile widening to one of true pleasure. "So it is, indeed. We would be happy to have you join us as long as you do not spoil the fun by telling me in advance if we shall fell the beast. It would take the sport out of it."

"I shan't say a word, your highness."

"Excellent. Shall we then? MacDonald, lead on if you please!"

The prince linked arms with Ginny, compelling her to walk with him behind MacDonald and MacEachine. She cast Coll a rueful shrug as he was left behind with Burke to follow. While not preferable to having her on his own arm, Coll couldn't regret the view. Without her cape to camouflage her body, he was treated to the sight of glossy, russet curls cascading down her back, ending just below her shoulder blades so as not to obscure the dip of her waist or flare of lush hips that swayed provocatively enough to put a hypnotic swish in her tartan skirt.

His loins stirred at the sight. Again. Aching arousal had become his constant companion. While a more pleasing consideration than their current state of affairs, the hunger would not be assuaged by logic or circumstance. He longed to drag her away from all of this, find a bed and leave it all behind for a day. A week more.

She seemed oblivious to the effect she had on men. Any of them, not just himself. Even Charles Edward was taken by her.

"Stalking is no sport for those of ill temperament, Miss Hughes." The prince pulled a silver flask from his pocket as they walked and drank from it. "One must practice stealth and patience."

Being in the prince's company had become a study of the same. Over the past year, Coll hadn't been in close enough company with the prince to be privy to his fickle temperament. Taking into account Ginny's observations of what the prince might feel about their devastating loss on the Drummossie Muir following a year of optimism and triumph, perhaps there was some justification to his changeable moods. While deep in his cups the previous evening, Charles Edward had vacillated between melancholy for all that had been lost and anger when Elcho, a local chieftain, refused the prince's orders to be of service then compounded the insult when he declared he'd never fight under the Stuart banner again. His rejection revived Charles Edward's suspicions of treachery among his ranks.

He displayed none of that ire this morning, though Coll suspected the prince had been nipping from that flask since they broke their fast hours before. Ginny maintained his good mood on the hunt by indulging the prince's stories of conquest rather than mentioning Cumberland's pursuit or questioning him about their plans for the days to come.

"The way ye watch the lass, I begin to wonder if ye're here to serve the prince or court her, lad." Burke's low, gravelly voice held a hint of humor.

Other than being in service to Coll's kinsman and the quiet, capable sort, he didn't know much about Burke. In fact, he'd almost rather the man not find his tongue now.

"I couldnae blame ye. She is a bonny thing to be sure."

"I dinnae ken yer meaning." Och, he kent the gibe precisely as Burke meant it, not that Coll would admit it. Had he been so obvious?

"I'm no' saying it wisnae right to bring her along whatever yer intentions toward her," Burke continued. "She's a canny one. She kens something we dinnae. 'Tis almost easy to believe her a true seer, aye?"

Coll eyed the man with caution. "Ye dinnae believe in her gift?"

"Nae more than ye, I'd wager. Curious, since I also trust her vision to my bones."

Nice to know he wasn't the only one with contradictory feelings about Ginny. The combination of cynicism and blind faith had been hard to reconcile. He'd contributed his mixed emotions to his unwilling attraction. Hopefully, that was not the case for Burke.

O'Sullivan chose that moment to join them, coming from the manor at a run. Heaven forbid the prince lack his company for even a moment, Coll thought acerbically. Much to his surprise, Charles Edward waved off his most ardent admirer and carried on with Ginny on his arm while the Irishman sulked behind them.

"'Tis obvious Charles Edward feels it too," Burke observed.

Coll groaned at the thought. Should Charles Edward decide to grace the lass with his affections, he didn't know what he'd do...any more than he knew what Ginny would do.

The thought renewed the many mysteries surrounding her along with doubts he'd been content to set aside. The lass volunteered her service and crossed miles of wilderness on foot without complaint in order to maintain a place in the prince's company. Why would a young woman go to such lengths without cause? What was it that drove her actions?

*I have a compelling reason to stay.*

As much as he might like to be that reason, Coll knew it wasn't he who moved her to stay with them. But what if it wasn't the prince's safety, either? What if Ginny had a far more nefarious purpose in

mind?

He watched her as she spoke to Charles Edward, blessing him with her broad, engaging smile. One would think pearls of wisdom fell from his lips given how enraptured she appeared. She gazed upon him with undeniable intensity as if she were painting his portrait. As if she could absorb every nuance of his character.

No, Ginny wasn't here to harm the prince in any way.

Now that Burke unwittingly put the suggestion in his mind, however, Coll couldn't help but wonder if she had hopes of serving the prince in another, more personal manner.

## Chapter 18

This was it.

Her family had always thought her aimless and unambitious. They'd never seen a pattern in Ginny's long line of short-lived jobs and varied pursuits. It made no sense to them why she worked as a tour guide at the Metropolitan Museum in college, interned with the lead archivist at the Central Park Conservatory, and spent summers as a costumed interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg. One year, she'd attended the Iroquois Indian festival and even signed up to volunteer at Woodstock 2019 before it was cancelled. Her family never saw it for what it was.

A longing to see history up close. To be a part of it.

Before facing a bloody war, getting kidnapped by an admittedly hot Scot, or fleeing an English army across the badlands clouded her enthusiasm, this was what she imagined it would be like. This was what she'd envied her sister when looking at Brontë's photos of the Edwardian era where she'd met Tris or the others she had from a time only a couple years beyond this one.

Now Ginny lived and breathed the history she'd studied for so long. The history she taught. And it wasn't only the picturesque landscape of the Highlands to thrill her this time. While the view of the loch was breathtaking and the nearby village with its squat stone houses and earthen roofs intriguing, it was her interaction with a true historical person that fulfilled a lifelong dream.

She smiled up at Bonny Prince Charlie with a rush of satisfaction as he waxed on about hunting and his own triumphs. It had been one thing to meet him and even travel among his small company of men. It was another thing to have a one-on-one conversation with him and truly immerse herself in history. As noted in the history books, he was handsome in his own way, pleasing, and charming. A bit pompous. A bit of an ass at times. Here was her chance to compare the conclusions reached by his biographer with her personal observations.

It would have been nice to invoke a little of that honesty she'd teased Coll about, to get into Prince Charlie's head. She'd love to discover the deeper rivers flowing through his mind. To find out what he'd really been thinking when he'd decided to face the royalist army at Culloden and question his strategy and mindset. Having seen how reminders of his failure affected his mood, she decided to keep her conversation in the more lighthearted.

"I understand you spent most of your life in Italy?"

"Sì, l'Italia è una terra bellissimo." His smile was lighthearted, maybe a little lopsided. Whatever was in the flask he kept drinking from probably wasn't tea. "Naturally, I would have preferred to spend my youth here among my subjects. Still, there were happy times. As a lover of music, I was surrounded by the best instructors."

"You play an instrument?"

"Yes, the bass viol." The cello. Surprising. "I'm also told I have a fine voice."

"I'm sure you do," she assured him. "Your Italian is almost musical."

"I'm also fluent in French and German, as well as English, obviously."

"But not Gaelic?" When his smile turned downward, she rushed to assuage him. "Of course, with your talent for languages, you would have learned if possible. I imagine there wasn't anyone there to teach you."

"No, there was not." His mouth formed a mulish moue. "I hadn't realized how valuable the ancient language could be. During the recent battle, I tried to rally the regiments on our left to join the fray. I told them I would lead them in the charge myself should they act before O'Sullivan and O'Shea forced me off the field. None of them understood me."

He looked so lost, she felt compelled to bolster his spirits. "I'm sure you would have rather stayed to lead them."

"Indeed. Indeed." Still distracted, he ran a hand over his hair. "That's when I lost my wig. Naturally you knew that."

Ginny didn't know what to make of that. Now that she'd led into the topic of the battle, she was hesitant to let it go. She glanced back at Coll to find him watching her with an inscrutable expression. She'd felt his eyes on her the entire time and wondered what he was thinking. Now, earlier, and every other time to boot. The whole night through she'd pondered what might be going through his head when he looked at her like that.

The only things she knew for certain were derived from their conversations. Given what he'd shared with her in the past few days, this would be an excellent opportunity to address his worries and ask the questions he insisted the prince would not want to hear.

"Your highness, may I ask you something?" He nodded his gracious assent. Hoping it didn't blister his good mood entirely, she went for it. "Why did you choose to confront Cumberland at such an inhospitable site as Culloden?"

He drew in a sharp breath. A few seconds later a mottled flush colored his cheeks before he released it. "A direct question, Miss



Hughes.”

Unable to soothe him with a modernism that this was a safe space, she kept her tone as even and pleasant as possible to encourage him. “There is no one better to ask it.”

Prince Charlie took another swig from his flask. Sympathy flooded Ginny. Obviously it all weighed on him more than any history book suggested.

“I cannot recall that anyone adequately explained the entire affair was far more risky than I assumed,” he said. “As I understood it, there was not much more we could do but stand and fight as gentlemen. Was that not the case?”

Ginny looked at Coll who listened intently and rocked her head in a pointed indication that the floor was his. When he didn’t immediately jump in, she answered. “I believe MacLeod had some thoughts on the matter.”

Coll’s expression was filled with anything but gratitude. Under the prince’s steady regard, he had no choice but to proceed.

“There were options, yer highness.” Coll managed to keep a kindly tone despite the anguish Ginny knew those seemingly reckless decisions had cost him. “A retreat across the Nairn, for example. The terrain there would have benefitted us as well as the moor suited Cumberland that day. Better yet, why no’ retreat to Inverness? Cumberland would have suffered heavy losses if they stormed the barricades. There were foodstuffs and stores enough there to hold out against a siege.”

“Retreat, retreat.” The prince wrinkled his nose and drank from his flask again. “Should we not have fought at all then?”

“It would have been best,” Coll defended the idea. “We might have dispersed into the moors to the north. Cumberland would lose his supply chain should he follow. We could have regrouped well fed and well rested at a more advantageous site under the predetermined strategies of yer most experienced generals.”

“Such as Murray, I suppose? He was a fool,” O’Sullivan cut in testily. “You see, yer highness, these Scots do no more than work against ye.”

“The only fool here is ye, O’Sullivan,” Coll growled. “I’ll have nae more of yer venom. Ye fill his head wi’ whispers of treachery and sedition when those who have supported him have done so in good faith alone. No’ for all the gold in England’s coffers would any of us betray him or lead him astray.”

The two men glared at each other. Frankly, Ginny was surprised it didn’t descend into a brawl then and there. Burke stepped between them, a hand on Coll’s shoulder. “Well said, lad. I think young MacLeod speaks on behalf of all yer faithful servants, yer highness.”

Prince Charlie gaped a moment longer, then took the avowal as his due. “Yes, well spoken, indeed, MacLeod. Though you did not have to be so exuberant in your assessment of the situation. We are grateful for your loyalty.”

Coll bowed before him. “And ye will always have it, yer highness. And my honesty above all else.”

However much it hurt, she thought.

O’Sullivan looked as though he might burst. Thankfully, MacDonald waved Prince Charlie forward and the stalking—great word for it since being hunted was exactly what it felt like—began in earnest.

It occurred to Ginny as she followed behind the men that Prince Charlie walked without any hint of discomfort in the aftermath of their trek through the mountains. Thinking back, he’d approached the climb with gusto and stamina proving he was more physically fit than she would have imagined. He was more of an outdoorsman than he was given credit for. Much to her surprise—and perhaps everyone else’s, too—Prince Charlie proved himself to be an expert shot.

Not in taking down the deer. Thankfully, the elusive beast MacDonald spoke of lived up to his reputation. Ginny hadn’t considered that eventuality when accepting the prince’s invitation to join them. Staying close to Coll had been her sole motivation.

*And why do you think that is?*

She shushed her recalcitrant inner dialogue. That didn’t stop her from sneaking a look at him. He was watching her in turn with an incongruous half-smile, half-frown twisting his lips. He didn’t look away until Burke poked him in the side to take his turn.

The deer’s absence didn’t stop the men from spending an hour or more of trying to hunt him down. With an overabundance of moorcocks in the area, the men soon turned to shooting the wild birds. The prince felled a brace of them taking each one in the wing to preserve the meat within.

Ginny knew the skill that took. She’d hunted—or more accurately, been forced to hunt—many a time with her father as a child. Most of the fowl were rendered inedible because her father wasn’t as good a shot as Prince Charlie. While she enjoyed the time with him, camping and backpacking, payment for it always came due in the form of the grief and regret that washed over her if he killed anything, bird or deer.

She could only hope these birds wouldn’t be ushered to Borrodale’s kitchen and land on the menu that night. It could taste like chicken, crispy and fried to perfection. Ginny wasn’t going to take a bite even if she had to starve. Ever since those trips with her dad, she’d never been able to bring herself to eat such trophies, especially

venison. Guilt over her father essentially killing Bambi had almost driven her to become a vegetarian like Brontë. Ginny loved a good cheeseburger too much to surrender to the idea. Still, even now, she could hardly bear those memories.

Upside, the prince was pleased with himself and regained his happy, inebriated mood despite the absent deer. He whistled a Highland reel and danced alone while the other men tried their hand at the birds.

“Take a shot, lassie?” Burke extended one of the guns to her.

She’d gotten a better measure of the old Scotsman over the past couple of days. He was a grumble and mumble but a real softy on the inside. That grumpy old man, wry humor reminded her of her dad. While she appreciated the inclusion, she wanted no part in the killing.

“Thank you, Mr. Burke, but I’m fine simply watching.”

“She’s but a woman, Burke,” O’Sullivan jeered. “You cannot think she’d have any hope of wielding a firearm.”

MacEachine joined him, slapping Burke on the shoulder. “Och, mon, women have nae skill wi’ weaponry. She couldnae hit a target a dozen feet away.”

*She can’t do it.*

There was no greater gauntlet a man could throw down at Ginny’s feet. Perhaps any woman’s feet. She wanted to do it, if only to rub his smug face in her achievement.

“I believe Miss Hughes will continue to astonish us w’ her talents. Why no’ let her have a go, yer highness?”

Ginny lifted her brows at Coll’s challenge. She wasn’t the only one. Other than Burke, the rest of the men guffawed and belittled feminine talents. Coll merely stared at her steadily as if he somehow knew she could do it. As if he had every faith in her ability to take down an entire flock of birds.

“Shall we make a wager of it?” he asked the men. “Say five shillings should she hit a target? Burke?”

Burke didn’t even spare Ginny a glance before he shook his head. “Nay, I’ll no’ take that bet.”

“Nay?” Coll winked at her. “Yer highness? MacDonald?”

The prince arched a haughty brow. “Five shillings it is, but mark me, MacLeod, you shall not emerge the victor.”

MacEachine sized her up and came to the same conclusion. “Aye, I’m in.”

“I as well.” MacDonald removed his tam and paced off a fair distance before hanging it on a branch. He returned with a mocking grin. “Dinnae fash about ruining my favorite cap, lass.”

“I’ve never shot one of these,” she whispered to Coll as he took the loaded weapon from Burke and handed it to her with a reassuring

smile.

While she'd like to reward his confidence in her, she would have been more comfortable with the handgun in her bag than this clumsy long rifle. She'd never shot a Brown Bess in her life. During her time at Colonial Williamsburg, she'd had the opportunity to try one of the French weapons that had been popular during the Revolutionary War. This couldn't be much different than that. All bang and little accuracy.

"Two shots from the same weapon," Coll bargained. "The first so that she may have the opportunity to see how it's sighted. Burke, will ye show her how it's done?"

Burke nodded and led her a few feet away. He helped her lift the heavy weapon to her right shoulder. Thankfully for Ginny, while she was lefthanded, she batted, played golf, and shot righthanded.

"Nice and easy, lassie." Having him at her back brought to mind lessons such as those with her dad.

*Lean into it, sweetheart, or it will knock you on your butt.*

*Yes, Daddy.*

*That's it. Now aim down the barrel and squeeze the trigger.*

*Yes, Daddy.*

She'd wanted to make him proud. She wanted to make Coll proud, too. To hear those words of praise again.

"I dinnae like the look in the prince's eye, lass," Burke murmured in her ear. "Best ye miss."

"You want me to miss on purpose?"

"It disnae serve to best a prince, lass."

"Then why offer it to me in the first place?"

"Och, I meant only to alleviate yer boredom," he said. "Young MacLeod shouldnae have made a wager of it. 'Tis nae longer casual sport, ye ken?"

A fit of royal temper probably wouldn't be tons of fun. The more she knew of Prince Charlie the more Ginny thought a therapist would have a field day with him. He was happy now, however she'd seen how he could go from euphoric to brooding in the blink of an eye. At first she'd attributed it to grief and loss. Since then, she'd come to believe it was more than that. On the other hand, she was no psychologist to make a diagnosis and since there was little chance of hitting the target on the first try anyway, Ginny took careful aim along the sights. She steadied herself and pulled the trigger.

The hat fluttered as the lead ball whizzed by and embedded itself in the tree trunk inches to the right. Burke rolled his eyes so hard he probably saw his brains and took the weapon to reload. Prince Charlie and the other men appeared to be rendered speechless by the near miss.

Coll...?

Well, it was barely a lift of his chin yet it exuded such satisfaction, Ginny was warmed to her toes.

Burke handed her back the weapon with a speaking look and she nodded. Hefting the gun back into place, she aimed farther right.

*I'm proud of ye, lass.*

*Oh, fuck the prince if he can't take a joke, Gin.*

## Chapter 19

“Quite a fine shot, Ginny.”

“I have a very particular set of skills.” She shrugged modestly, though her eyes were sparkling. She looked up at him as though waiting for something, then shook her head. “Never mind.”

He’d missed something. Coll couldn’t imagine what it was.

“Where did ye learn to shoot?”

“My father. Without a son, he was rather insistent on making one out of me.” She summoned a tight smile. “It didn’t really work as well as he hoped. I could never bring myself to shoot a living creature. Once we went hunting and he came upon me with a big buck only a dozen feet away. Instead of shooting it, I was taking pic—that is, sketching it. If nothing else, he finally believed me.”

“Nevertheless, he would be as impressed as I by today’s showing.” Coll watched Charles Edward as he stormed away with the others in his wake. Burke’s grumblings had been more prosaic than he would have imagined. His highness would be a bear to deal with for the remainder of the day, no doubt. “I suppose ye should have missed.”

“One could argue ye shouldnae have made the wager to begin wi’,” Burke mumbled under his breath as he gathered up the weapons the men had left behind.

“Yes.” Ginny looked up at him with a frown. “What made you do it? Or more to the point, what made you think I could do it at all?”

“Yer reaction when O’Sullivan scorned ye.” He couldn’t help but grin at the recollection of the way her lips pursed tight and her eyes narrowed. “Whatever else, I’m surprised ye dinnae choose to shoot him instead of putting a hole in the MacDonald’s best cap. He’s an intolerable jackanapes.”

“I resisted the temptation.”

His grin became a full-blown smile at her tart rejoinder. He couldn’t help but notice how she glowed under his praise. The flush of color in her cheeks made her even more bonny than normal. Bending an arm toward her, he executed a small bow. “May I tempt ye wi’ something else, lass? Supper is an hour or more away. How about wine and refreshment to celebrate yer victory?”

“Och, best ye both steer clear of the prince until he has time to forget yer impertinence,” Burke cut in. “Doubly on ye, young MacLeod, for suggesting ye collect on yer wager to boot. And both of ye best steer clear of the Irishman. Heard him whispering to Charles

Edward about the young miss being a witch after all.”

“We could sneak in through the kitchen. Oh, that reminds me...” Ginny dug into her bag and removed another cloth covered bundle. This one she presented to Burke. “I brought this for you, Mr. Burke, to thank you for your kindness. I would have given it to you earlier, but I didn’t have enough for everyone.”

Burke unfolded the linen and inhaled with appreciation. “Why, thank ye for thinking of me, lass. ’Tis a special treat. If ye’re in search of refreshment though, are ye certain ye dinnae want them?”

“No, they are for you. Please.”

Coll took in her rosy cheeks and shiny eyes. She was pleased by Burke’s approval. Interesting.

“I’m certain we can find something in the kitchens to satisfy us,” he said. “Prince Charlie would never dream of gracing the kitchens wi’ his presence.”

“Ha, you called him Prince Charlie instead of Charles Edward!” She bumped her shoulder against his with a teasing grin and looped her arm through his. “I told you it would endure.”

“A mere slip of the tongue, lass.”

Burke caught his eye. Not even the smallest twitch of the man’s lips or flicker of an eyelid, yet Coll was certain the older man was reminding him of his earlier gibe about courting Ginny. Burke could jest as much as it pleased him. Coll wasn’t courting the lass, not to wed, nor to his bed. If he courted her favor, it was because her conversation had proven far superior to that of the prince’s men or the prince himself.

The realization rudely recalled him to the wayward thoughts he’d entertained earlier. As he and Ginny strolled toward the manor in Burke’s wake, he couldn’t help but wonder again what kept her here.

“I want to thank ye for initiating the conversation wi’ Prince Charlie regarding the battle.” He employed the moniker intentionally to keep her mood light. He appreciated her effort to raise the subject and had to some extent been satisfied by the prince’s response. It was more clear than ever, though, that the prince placed his faith in the wrong people. It would benefit Scotland mightily if O’Sullivan returned to his own country and let Scotland be.

“You’re welcome.” She squeezed his hand and grinned up at him. “Was there anything else you wanted to ask him? I’ll see if I can work it in.”

Coll seized the opportunity to seek a truth or two himself. “Now that ye’re such besom friends wi’ the prince? I maun say, ye seem to enjoy the prince’s company.”

“Yes, academically speaking, he’s fascinating.”

An odd thing to say. Coll couldn’t puzzle out her meaning.

“Academically?”

Something flickered across her face. As though she'd been caught amidst a crime. “What I mean is, I've never had the chance to meet royalty before, much less converse with a prince. I find him fascinating in that he's not at all what one would expect and precisely what I would imagine at the same time. If that makes any sense.”

“No’ really,” he admitted. “I suppose his conversation is gauged for such a reaction. He does have a reputation wi’ the ladies.”

His inflection must have revealed a hint of his inner thoughts. She stopped dead in her tracks, both brows lifted high as she stared at him. “You think I’m in danger of succumbing to his charms, such as they are?”

Saying it like that, no. Ginny didn’t strike him as the sort who could be seduced against her will. If she were so inclined, no doubt Charles Edward would have the tables turned on him.

Even so, it was no answer.

“He possesses a measure of charisma.”

With the absence of a prompt denial on his part, her tone grew terse. “While I appreciate Prince Charlie’s place in history, he’s not at all my type. And I absolutely wouldn’t want a guy who expects to always be right even when he’s wrong or wants to be fawned over all the time.”

She drew her hand from the crook of his arm and hurried ahead. He’d hit a nerve. Whether it was that he’d touched on her secret objective or not, he wasn’t certain. Coll caught up with her before she outpaced him and caught her arm. She scowled at him and he refrained from questioning her curious use of “guy.” Likely it wouldn’t go over well just then.

“Ye’re no’ interested in currying Prince’s Charlie’s favor, then.”

“Not even a little.” Her lip curled as if the thought alone were repugnant. “I can’t imagine why you would even think that. Especially given...”

She trailed off and bit her lip. Coll’s confidence soared.

“Given?”

“I was married. Before.”

The abrupt change of subject wasn’t at all what he’d expected. For certs his jaw hung open for a full minute before he snapped it shut. Ginny took the opportunity to resume her furious pace without looking back.

He fell in by her side. “Was? Are ye widowed then?”

“It was a mistake. A huge mistake,” she continued, gazing out over the loch rather than looking at him. “The moment we exchanged vows everything changed. Or maybe it just became more obvious. I don’t know. Either way, there was no easy way out at that point.”



As usual Ginny's explanation manifested into a dozen questions in his mind. Familiar with her normal response to interrogation—that is, to reveal nothing whatsoever—he waited for her to carry on of her own free will. It cost him mightily to do so.

Just when he thought he would burst with curiosity, she stopped and turned to him.

"He would have never encouraged me to shoot with the big boys like that." She jerked a thumb back the direction they'd come. "He would have been like the others, saying I couldn't do it. That I hit it would have been attributed to dumb luck. Nothing more. Same thing applied to every other situation. I never measured up. I spent a lot of time...too much time trying. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be bothering you with my problems."

"Nay, lass. Dinnae apologize," he said. "I wouldnae have asked if I dinnae want to ken. Pray continue."

"No, it's nothing." She wrinkled her nose as if smelling something rotten, then shook her head and Coll thought she would say no more. Then the words burst forth as if she couldn't contain them. "He hated being outdone."

"In what way?"

"In any way." She gnawed her lip until it was swollen and bruised. The only outward expression of the apprehension she clearly bore within. "It wasn't only being able to do something better than him. I couldn't even *know* something he didn't already without him questioning the source of my knowledge or being disparaged in some way. He doubted my memory a million times even when it rarely proved me wrong. Probably more than anything, he hated saying I was right. He complained about how I looked. That I was overweight or that I never tried hard enough to look pretty for him. Yet if I dressed up, he'd either accuse me of competing for attention or of trying to impress other men. There was no pleasing him."

Despite her defiant tone, Coll could feel her withdrawal. His fists clenched. It was a good thing the boorish arse was already in his grave or Coll would be hard put not to put him there himself for diminishing the bold, brave lass he knew. She fairly shriveled under the memory of her husband. What more had he done to stifle her brilliance in life?

With a bit of retribution off the table, Coll longed to take her in his arms. Uncertain whether such a demonstration would be welcome, he opted for trying to tease her from her doldrums. "Sounds like he kent naught of women. Ladies take pride in their appearance as much for their own pleasure or to impress other ladies as for the enjoyment of any man."

"Thank you!" She threw her hands skyward. He wasn't certain whether it was he or the Lord Almighty she addressed. It didn't seem

to matter. "Yes, that's exactly it. He didn't see it that way. As far as he was concerned, my world was supposed to revolve around his radiance, not attempt to overshadow him. Because I couldn't, obviously. Me being me."

Coll grunted in disgust. He didn't understand the reference exactly, but her demeanor spoke more than words could relate. "Ye are perfect as ye are, lass."

She offered a tight smile and equally strained smile, but it was clear she did not believe him. That Ginny couldn't see what he and every other man who met her saw astounded him. That a woman with such outward confidence would accept such behavior from any man was beyond him.

"When I was with him I lost who I was." She shook her head again with evident chagrin. "I can't believe I dumped all of that on you."

"I'm honored that ye should feel comfortable confiding in me," he said honestly.

She shrugged but offered an apologetic smile. "In my defense, I also lost most of my friends while I was married. I didn't have anyone left to talk to. It wasn't even that Luke disliked them. It was more that I shouldn't have any...or need any beyond him. Especially male friends, whether they were gay or not."

"Ye have many male friends?"

Her brow arched then fell. Her gaze slid to the side and he thought he heard her mutter something about a "different time" and "ideology" before she met his eye once more. "Not the sort you're thinking of, I'm sure. In our society, it's more common to have meaningful friendships among any gender."

He'd offended her yet again. "I dinnae mean to imply ye shared yer favors, lass. I was merely surprised by yer revelation. The ladies at Dunchleach dinnae often mingle wi' the men. Even at court, women flirt and fawn, however, in my experience, 'tis uncommon for a woman to foster true friendship wi' a man nae matter how jovial they are."

Ginny blinked hard. Her lips twitched before she compressed them into a tight line. Given the sparkle in her light periwinkle eyes, she was laughing at him. Coll had no idea what he'd said to arouse her good humor. It didn't matter so long as it swept away her troubles.

"Ye're well rid of him, I think," he said, thinking to close the topic on a high note. "Nae lass deserves such a jealous spouse."

"Jealous?" Her bark of laughter was anything but amused. The light in her eyes faded, her hands fisted at her sides. When she spoke, her tone was as bitter as burnt toast. "He wasn't jealous of me. He simply hated not being at the center of attention and expected all eyes to be on him no matter where he went. He loved it when women

would fall at his feet, loved being fawned over.”

There it was. The connection to her scathing rebuttal when he'd asked about her attachment to Charles Edward. The prince, too, enjoyed the attention of the ladies.

She continued, ““Problem was, he wanted that all the time. It got so bad after we were married...”

When she paused, he softly urged her to continue. “Aye?”

“I wasn't supposed to be my own person,” she offered with a shrug as if the man's imbecilic behavior were of no consequence when clearly he continued to sway her perception. “To him, I wasn't anything more than an extension of him. I suppose around here, that's the way it always is.”

“Och, a man would have to be a fair dullard to think such a thing,” he scoffed at the assumption. “The way I see it, a wife isnae an extension of her husband but a reflection.”

Her brow furrowed into twin lines. “What do you mean?”

“It may no' be a popular way of thinking, but I believe the manner in which a man treats his wife is reflected in her behavior, aye?” He took her hand and loosened her fist, smoothing his palm along hers. “Ye see, should he love his wife sufficiently, a husband need never fear she'd have reason to wander, aye? Should he love her sufficiently, he should have nae reason to believe she dresses to please anyone other than him...unless it is for herself, as I mentioned before. Should he put her happiness above his own, he will be happy in turn.”

“Happy wife, happy life?” Ginny's smile reflected taut cynicism, nevertheless her fingers curled once more to clasp his. “You're obviously not married.” Her eyes widened, her sweet lips parted in surprise. “I guess I never thought to ask. Are you?”

Coll shook his head, pleased by the relief in her expression. “Would ye be displeased if I were?”

A wee playful smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “I would have hated to have those scones go to waste. I mean, I could have given them to Prince Charlie instead.”

She would give him nothing, not even an inch. He'd have to fight for every step forward. It was the first battle he was happy to engage in.

“Och, I cannae derive any assurance from that,” he teased. “Ye gave a fair share to Burke as well. Have I any hope if he's my competition?”

Her husky laugh warmed his blood. “Only if you also want to remind me of my father.”

“No' in the least.” Lacing his fingers through hers, he lifted her hand to his lips. “Ye're a saucy minx.”

“You say that like it's a compliment.”

Aye, and he wouldn't have her any other way.

## Chapter 20

“Say what ye like about the lad, he can hold his drink.”

Ginny smiled at Burke as he took a seat next to her at the long table in Borrodale House’s main hall. He handed her a glass of wine and she thanked him. She didn’t have to ask to whom he referred. Prince Charlie had traded his flask for a glass and given his flushed cheeks, was fairly deep in his cups.

From his biography, she knew his drinking habit had already been noted before his arrival in Scotland. She’d heard him reject milk before saying it gave him a bloody flux. Lacking any medical training, she couldn’t diagnose the problem. Because of that intolerance, he drank with his breakfast and didn’t stop all day. It would only get worse from here on out.

Still, he managed to converse with a steady voice and seemingly level head. When she and Coll had rejoined the prince in the dining hall, they’d received no more than a sideward glare for their earlier impertinence. His attention, and everyone else’s including Coll’s, was on the old man in the center of the room.

Coll shared a lengthy exchange in Gaelic with the man before relaying that the movement of English ships off the coast would make it impossible for a French rescue ship to slip into Loch Nan Ceall or even the larger inlet of Loch Nan Uamh without detection. The elderly man had been sent by Aeneas MacDonald to act as the prince’s guide from this point on.

“Who is he?” she asked Burke.

“That there is Donald MacLeod,” he told her.

There had been some discussion the previous evening about Prince Charlie’s departure, though a solid course of action had not been determined. From what she’d gathered, it had hung entirely on the arrival of a French ship to retrieve him. History books had told Ginny that wouldn’t happen.

This man’s arrival confirmed it.

“Is he a clansman of Coll’s?”

“Aye, and finest seaman this side of Glasgow,” Burke said. “I ken ye wouldnae think so to look at him.”

The elder MacLeod must have been seventy if he was a day and, from what she could see, didn’t have a single tattoo. Nevertheless, to Ginny’s eye he personified the classic image of the crusty old sailor. His gaunt cheeks and loose jowls were covered in steely whiskers.

Thinning grey hair stood out at all angles from his head. Give him a slicker and hat, and he could have been Captain Ahab.

His manner was as crusty as his appearance.

“Och, I willnae take the trouble to deliver ye somewhat who would likely hand ye over to the royalists as look at ye,” he spat when Prince Charlie ordered him to carry a message to the chieftain of Clan MacLeod and to Sir Alexander MacDonald on the Isle of Skye. “Nay, I willnae do it.”

Prince Charlie scowled at the man and called for another bottle of whisky. At least she and Coll weren’t at the top of the prince’s shit list any longer. For her part, Ginny was glad to see the men taking the jeopardy they were in more seriously now.

“Why won’t he do what the prince wants?” she whispered to Burke. She bit her tongue before she revealed that in the normal course of history, the prince would indeed pass through the Isle of Skye on his path to freedom.

“I thought ye were a seer, lassie.” She shot him a wry glance and thought she saw the ghost of a smile on his otherwise stoic countenance. Burke sipped his whisky and offered her what she was beginning to see was his signature shrug. “Sir Alexander is the head of my clan. I’ll no’ speak ill of him, however the prince is working under the misconception that he has the loyalty of the chieftains of Skye. Auld Donald kens as well as I do that isnae the case.”

“Then why are you here? Why is Coll?”

He huffed in amusement. “Have ye always agreed wi’ what yer elders want of ye, lassie?”

No, she hadn’t.

Burke patted her hand. “This could go on for hours more, lassie. Why no’ take a walk down the beach? ’Twould be a more pleasant way to enjoy the evening.”

There were a dozen more pleasant ways to pass the evening, including how she’d passed the afternoon with Coll. Rather than lingering in the kitchen or taking a walk—something they both agreed had lost its charm over the past few days—they had made a picnic of sorts and found a shady spot with a view of the loch. The atmosphere had been one of discovery, camaraderie, and a hint of flirtation made even better by what seemed to be genuine admiration in his eyes.

It was hard to determine what it was. A kindling friendship or something more physical? Was she reaching too high? As she’d grasped before, he was so far out of her league it was ridiculous.

Luke had always been out of her league, too, as he often reminded her. He could have done so much better...and had proven it by cheating on her. Despite that, he insisted she was lucky to have him.

If all that was true, why did he persist in trying to get her back?

She gnawed her lip thinking about it. The obvious answer was that it was an ego thing. He was the one who broke off his relationships, not the other way around. No one dumped superstar Pro Bowl running back Luke Jorgenson. Not without payback.

Hence his unwillingness to let her go. Most likely he only wanted to win her back so he could leave her on his own terms. The alternative was that she was more worthy and valuable in his eyes than he'd ever given her credit for. That love motivated him rather than ego alone. After knowing him for four years, the thought was laughable.

Ugh, life with him had turned her so inside out, Ginny couldn't even determine whether or not a guy wanted to have sex with her anymore. She thought Coll might. Although there hadn't been any further innuendo on his part, he took every chance to touch her hand or tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She wasn't positive, but a few times it had seemed like he was about to go in for a kiss. They'd never quite gotten there, much to her regret.

The depth of understanding she gained wasn't something Ginny could ever regret. If nothing else, gaining his friendship had been a gift. It had been so long since she'd shared such intimate confidences with someone. Someone who cared.

While Luke and her marriage hadn't been brought up again—thank God, she was mortified by her unexpected unload of baggage—they had talked about the prince and his efforts to regain the crown. Coll told her some of what he'd done over the past year to help achieve that goal. He'd taken her hand as he spoke. She wasn't even certain he realized it. His hard grip conveyed his emotions. Guilt and anguish laced his words for the lives he'd taken and the horrors he'd lived through. As a mere witness to the bloodbath rather than a participant, she could only imagine the burden he carried. She admitted how the memory of it invaded her dreams. He confessed to the same. That a darkness had fallen over him that he didn't know how to shed. A tentative diagnosis was easier here. Clearly he suffered from some sort of PTSD. He called his admissions unmanly. Ginny called them human.

He cared. He sacrificed. It broke her heart to know what his loyalty had cost him.

What it might continue to cost him in the days and weeks to come.

She wanted to spend more time talking with him, but she could see his attention was fully engaged with the issue at hand. For her, the conversation at the head table revealed nothing new. Since it was all, at this point, proceeding as history understood it, she saw no reason to stay. Thanking Burke for the suggestion, she slipped out of the dining

room and made her way outside.

The sun was beginning its descent toward the horizon. She was beginning to think there was no such thing as a mediocre view in Scotland. Every which way she turned there was a vista to take her breath away. Had she been in her time, she would have stopped a thousand times already to take a picture to preserve the sights forever. There'd been no opportunity here to do so as she was rarely alone. Had she had her bag with her right then, she would have whipped out her phone and taken a picture of the stunning wash of pink and lavender bouncing off the billowy clouds and the sparkle of light off the waters of Loch Nan Uamh.

She would have to do with a mental snapshot. Another when the colors deepened to more brilliant hues. Luckily, her memory would hold it dear for quite some time.

A sparse number of trees dotted the wooded parkland between the manor and the loch only a few hundred yards away. Ginny followed a stream that bisected the park, breathing in the fresh air and enjoying the pleasant weather after being inside with the fires burning and the taint of smoke and fish in the air.

A rocky outcropping marked the line between parkland and the pebbled beach beyond. There were boulders taller than she with flat, craggy edges jumbled and stacked together in a manner only nature could manage. Though no more than ten feet, the effect was almost cliff-like. In some places, trees and shrubs protruded from the gaps between them. Hiking her skirts high, Ginny took hold of one of the low branches overhanging the crag and used it for support as she worked her way down a progression of stone and hollow that formed a steep stairway of sorts.

Then back up, scaling the rock face as though this were her bouldering gym back home rather than a natural formation. Living in a city like New York, rock climbing gyms had always been preferable to treadmills or even yoga for exercise and clearing her mind. By the time she put her feet on the ground once more she was feeling pretty damn serene.

Continuing to explore the rocks, she discovered a triangular opening near a large oak where two stones tented together. It was large enough for her to crawl into and curiosity demanded that she do precisely that. There was a cavity beyond the opening. Unfortunately, it was too dark inside to see how big it was.

Again, if she only had her phone...

Ginny backed out and stood, dusting off her hands. She strolled along the water's edge watching the miniature waves roll in and spill across the rocks at her feet. The sight reminded her of Coll's teasing comment about joining her for a swim. While he wasn't here to



indulge that fantasy, it *did* look cool and inviting.

She sat and tugged off her boots. They were comfortable enough, but weren't meant to be worn all day, every day. Her still aching feet would thank her for the reprieve. Setting the boots away from the water's edge, she waded in and curled her toes into the pebbled sand with a sigh of relief. She lifted her skirts higher and eased in up to her knees. The cold water made her shiver and roused a rash of goosebumps up her legs, but she didn't care.

"God, that's good."

So good she wanted that feeling all around her. A full body ice pack to soothe her aching muscles. Her hot bath the night before hadn't entirely taken away her aches and pains.

Glancing over her shoulder, she could just make out the black slate shingles of the manor partially obscured by the trees in between. Everyone was inside with the prince. No one would see her. No one would know.

Before she even left the water, she'd wound her hair into a loose knot on top of her head and secured it with the black elastic she kept around her wrist. She shed her bodice and reached for the laces of her stays.

"Ye best stop there, lass."

Ginny jumped in surprise and glanced up to find MacLeod leaning against the rocks.

"Any other man might have taken the chance to look his fill before announcing his presence."

"I may have, under different circumstances." He pushed away from the cliff and strode toward her. "Regrettably, something ye mentioned about discomfort in our relationship compelled me to announce myself."

It was a bit different when she wanted him in her personal space.

His gaze lingered on the low neckline of her shift and Ginny considered employing the renewed confidence the afternoon had blessed her with to seize the opportunity to proceed with her planned seduction. She could strip down—strip *him* down—and teach him a lesson or two about personal space. As if to point out what a ridiculous notion that was, pebbles and rocks as big as her fist poked against her bare feet. This wasn't the best location for that.

Nor was she the innate seductress one might hope.

Option two, she could stop overthinking every move and simply enjoy his solid presence, his company. Without subtext or aspersion because she liked him, plain and simple.

"I thought you'd be locked into that conversation longer. What was the verdict in there?"

"Auld MacLeod will leave in the morning to secure a small boat to

carry Prince Charlie over the Minch to the Hebrides,” he told her. “I believe he’ll be able to find transport from there back to France or at the very least to the Orkneys or Norway.”

Or neither. Ginny wasn’t going to tell him of the months Prince Charlie would spend sailing from island to island, evading the English pursuit. That was, if she repaired whatever damage she’d done or would do between then and now. Somewhere in the time it would take for auld MacLeod to return with that boat, her moment to realign history would be upon her. But when?

“How long do you think—” She lost her train of thought as Coll bent to unlace his ghillie brogues. “What are you doing?”

“Ye were going for a swim, aye? I’ll join ye.”

“The water’s really cold.”

His chuckle dismissed the warning. He yanked off his boots and stockings and tossed them down next to hers. He straightened then stopped midway to retrieve one of her hiking boots. “What sort of footwear is this?”

Of all the questions he’d put forth, this one was the hardest to address. That they were the twenty-first century waterproof sort of footwear with leather uppers and the off-roading tires version of rubber soles was hardly an answer she could provide to an eighteenth-century Highlander. She plucked it from him as nonchalantly as possible and dropped it on top of the other.

“Do you like them? They’re all the rage in the Colonies.”

With all the things she fretted over, Ginny didn’t want to add her modern boots to the list. She needed a distraction.

Untying her skirt, she let it fall to the sandy beach, then plucked at the strings of her stays and shimmied them over her hips. Flagrant seduction hadn’t been in her game plan. She had his attention, though, and was eager to keep it focused on her. Reaching for the hem of her shift, her nerves failed her. Despite his claim that he was going to join her, MacLeod hadn’t moved a muscle. She wasn’t about to get naked alone, especially if skinny-dipping wasn’t what he had in mind. Talk about awkward.

Her knee length linen shift was thick enough to cover everything, even if it got wet. If he wanted to take it a step further, that would be on him. Turning, she put a little sway in her stride and hurried back to the water.

The setting sun reflected off the surface almost blinding her. Icy water licked at her calves and splashed up to her hips cooling her lustful fantasies as she twirled around.

“Are you coming?”

MacLeod had already shucked off his jacket and waistcoat. He reached for the buckle of his belt. For a second, she was paralyzed by

the idea that he meant to strip down to nothing. Thankfully—or was it unfortunately?—he left on his long shirt that reached to mid-thigh and walked toward her. He squinted against the sun so hard it nearly joined his brows together.

Those brows arched skyward the moment he entered the water. “Michty me, ’tis feckin’ cold, lass!”

## Chapter 21

With a laugh, Ginny surged forward and bobbed down to her shoulders to overcome the shock of the cold water. Not wanting to crust her hair with seawater after just washing it, she settled for a pseudo breaststroke to propel her farther out into the loch and warm her. The current tugged at her shift and kissed her limbs with a soothing caress, numbing the aches and pains and strain brought on by the events of the last few days.

She paddled around to find that MacLeod had disappeared. He surfaced right in front of her wiping water droplets off his face with a visible shudder. There was a good-natured smile on his lips and a light in his eyes she hadn't yet been privy to but was glad to see. Coll deserved some laughter after all he'd been through.

"Och, ye're a braw lassie to dip more than a toe wi'out even a wee shiver. When ye do something, ye gie it laldy, do ye no'?"

"In all fairness, I was prepared for it." An insuppressible grin found its way to her lips. She, too, hadn't felt so lighthearted in days. Maybe years.

"I've nae such excuses." He stood straight with the water level with his collarbone and ran his hands over his head to slick back the shaggy hair that clung to his forehead and cheeks. "I spent my childhood swimming in the waters of the Minch. Been many a year since I did so."

Paddling in a lazy circle around him, she rotated her head to keep him in her sight. "The Minch? That's out by the Hebrides, isn't it?"

"Aye, between the coast and the western isles." He slapped the water's surface playfully sending a small wave in her direction. "Mostly my brothers and I would swim closer to home in Loch Dunvegan, but as lads do, we'd often bully one another into daring the open water."

She noted his wistful look. "Sounds like you miss it."

He shook his head with a low chuckle. "We were wee dunderheids wi' pricks bigger than our brains."

When he winced and glanced at her, Ginny stalled him before he could speak by splashing water in his face. "No need to apologize. That's probably the best description for young lads that I've ever heard."

For most of the male species, in fact.

Except perhaps Coll MacLeod.

“Ye ken, I hivnae gone more than a day in the past year wi’out thoughts of war on my mind. Wi’out worry and woe nipping at my heels,” Coll said. “Yer company has been a pleasant diversion.”

She’d only intended to divert his attention from her boot. Now he sidetracked her with the switch from casual conversation to heartfelt.

“As has yours.”

He couldn’t know how true that was.

Aware that he watched her—not smiling really...but not *not* smiling—and that she was staring at him too steadily, she resumed her easy sidestroke in a circle around him. He matched the motion to face her. The exercise didn’t stifle her curiosity. She knew almost nothing about him and would like to know more before she slept with him. Now she knew he was from the Isle of Skye. The one recently mentioned inside.

“If you swam in Loch Dunvegan, you must have grown up around Dunchleach Castle then? I’ve heard the gardens are lovely.”

“No’ around it. In it.”

Forgetting her purpose, Ginny gawked at him again. Her feet dropped, one toe finding the bottom to bob her upward again. The water wasn’t over her head. It would be past her chin though, so she bounced on her toes waiting for him to continue.

He shrugged at her expectant look as if the subject were of little importance. The deep lines furrowing his brow belied his indifference. “My father is the MacLeod of Dunchleach.”

“The chieftain Mr. Burke says would never help Prince Charlie’s escape?”

“One and the same.”

So, his joining the Jacobite cause wasn’t only a move against the chief of his clan, it was in defiance of his father’s wishes. That explained a lot.

She returned to her circuit around him. Her orbit never widened. As if he were a force too magnetic to escape, he drew her in. “If your father didn’t support the Jacobite rebellion, what did he say when you told him you were leaving to fight with Prince Charlie?”

“Say?” Coll grimaced and jerked his chin in a sharp negative motion. “No’ a thing. There was a tidy amount of shouting. At my younger brother Hamish, as well. Ye see, my father supported the Stuarts prior to Prince Charlie’s arrival last year. We were taught at his knee to do the same. When the prince arrived in Scotland, he realized the risk to his position and began to work against the Jacobites instead. He led my clansmen against us at the battle at Inverurie this December past and was defeated. The losses he took convinced him and the other chieftains on Skye no’ to participate in the recent battle on the Drum Mossie Muir. My brother and I were no’

as fickle wi' our fealty. He dinnae appreciate our 'insolence,' as he called it."

She'd overheard enough conversation between him and the other men to know he'd been away from his home and a part of the Jacobite militia for almost a year. A wealth of questions flooded her mind about why that was the case. What they planned to do instead.

Ginny refrained from voicing any of them in favor of what felt like a budding friendship. "Have you talked to him? Written to him?"

Changing directions, he swam backward then to the side. Ginny wouldn't let him drop the subject. "Coll?"

"No' a word. Because of our disagreement, I hivnae seen or heard from my mother or sister either. I dinnae yet ken how many of my clansmen escaped the battle, how many died."

"You can go to Dunchleach and find out for yourself, can't you?"

With a noncommittal shrug, he changed directions again. "Once my service to Prince Charlie is complete, aye, I will return home... should I be welcome. My father is a hard man, lass. No' one to forgi' and forget easily."

He had said he sacrificed all he had for the Jacobite cause. She supposed she'd taken his statement as a loss of money or possessions. Her heart ached for him. Family was another thing entirely. In the end, it was what mattered most. At least, that's what she'd thought before Luke had come around.

Ginny shoved the thought away. This wasn't about her problems, it was about Coll's. Had she the ability, she would use the power of time travel to undo it all. She didn't, though. She'd watched enough popular television to know that even years of planning couldn't stop the Jacobite rebellion from seeking and reaching its tragic climax.

Swimming closer, she laid a hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry, Coll. Surely your father—"

A splash of water caught her right in the face. "Dinnae fash. 'Tis no' of great importance."

"Sounds like it is." The briny water stung her eyes and she wiped it away, refusing to be deterred. "I understand, there's few things worse than being at odds with your father."

He seized on the distraction. "Ye're no' close to yers? From what ye said earlier, I thought ye were."

"I was. Always," she countered. "We have a term where I come from. 'Daddy's girl.'"

"Daddy's girl?" he tasted the phrase with a skeptical expression.

"Yes. You see, I have two sisters and no brothers. Jane, the oldest, is a miniature of our mother. They do everything together," she told him still holding his arm for support while she stood on her toes. "The middle sister, Brontë, belongs to our grandmother. Sometimes I think

she loves Granny more than she does the rest of us. Without a son, my dad was stuck with me. I'm now the best outdoorsman a woman has ever been molded into."

His expression softened at her self-disparaging observation. His fingers traced the line of her jaw. "I doubt he was disappointed, lass."

"Oh, I know for a fact that I've disappointed him at least once."

Realizing what she said, Ginny forced a laugh and pushed away from him to resume her mermaid moves. He caught her by the ankle and reeled her back in. Holding her around the waist to keep her afloat, he stared at her with warm, caring eyes that tempted her to reveal everything.

That wouldn't do at all.

Ginny tried to kick away. He pulled her forward again.

"I've been wondering since our conversation this morning, why ye would wed a brutish arse such as yer husband," he said. "Did yer father arrange the match?"

Surprised by the change of topic, she stopped fighting him and rested her hands on his arms to keep herself afloat. "It felt like it sometimes, but no. I went into it voluntarily."

He blinked, clearly surprised. "Ye encouraged the affections of such a loathsome man?"

"At first, yes. He had his own brand of charisma, you see," she explained. "It was difficult not to be overwhelmed by his attention. He was a big deal, you see? A man with a measure of fame. Is that a word here?"

"Aye, notoriety. He held a prominent place in society?"

"Something like that. It took a while to see him as he really was." Over his shoulder she watched the sun slip over the horizon in a blaze of glory, remembering how brilliantly Luke shone before the light was snuffed out. "It's hard to explain. I suppose it was like a fairy tale. I was thrilled he chose me when he could have done better."

"Better?"

"Someone..." Her shrug was so infinitesimal it felt like a twitch. "Someone more than me. Smarter. Prettier. Funnier."

She'd never been romantically popular with guys. By some unknown measure, she'd been weighed and found wanting. If there was a friend zone for women, that's where she'd been stuck most of the time. She was always one of the guys. A drinking buddy. A fuck buddy. Never serious girlfriend material.

Never worthy.

"Och, I dinnae think that's possible." When she tried to pull away, he held her firm. "Look at me, lass. As much a fool as this man seems, I cannae think he dinnae ken as well as I do that ye're a bonny lass through and through."

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I dinnae say what I dinnae mean.” He smoothed a damp curl away from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear. “Ye’re as lovely a lass as I’ve ever known.”

Luke had done such a job on her, it had been years since Ginny believed she was either pretty or desirable. Coll made her feel as though she were that and more. Special. Everything.

Enough.

Was it any wonder she wanted more?

Her hands slid up his forearms exploring the taut lines of muscle and tendon. Up the bulge of his biceps to rest on his chest. Whether it was due to the cold water or her, his nipples were hard beneath his wet shirt. She circled the hard nub with her fingertip and his eyes darkened to an irresistible smolder. His fingers flexed into her ribs. The brush of his thumbs against the underside of her breasts taunted her. Her calf brushed his thigh and his gaze fell to her lips. Her breath grew shallow; a little quiver in her heart sent her pulse askew.

She’d never imagined how quickly the leap could be made from fun and games to amity to intimacy. It certainly hadn’t been part of her vague master plan for seduction. Yet in a heartbeat, that sensual energy that sizzled between them time and again exploded. Her mind blacked out everything they’d talked about up to that sweet, sincere compliment.

All she could think of was Coll. And the fact that his lips were inches away.

Another fairy tale come true.

\* \* \*

“This wisnae what I intended when I followed ye into the water, lass. I am thankful for yer ear and counsel.” Coll struggled to ignore the sensual glide of her thigh against his. To burn the enticing image of her in nothing more than a shift as she entered the water with her siren’s call. To give no thought to how it clung to her lush curves now.

“It wasn’t what I had in mind either.” Though she didn’t smile outright, she radiated light and laughter. “I’m willing to let nature take its course.”

As with their earlier flirtation and innuendo, the implication was unmistakable. He could take her and be welcomed. It was evident by the fire in her eyes, the teasing of her words. He could have taken her amid the wildflowers or up against a dozen trees today. Knowing she was ready and willing left him in a state of arousal most of the day. Now with the invitation in her eyes, his body screamed at him to do precisely that. To bury himself deep inside her hot sheath and take her with him to Nirvana.

As much as he wanted her, he didn’t want to toy with her



affections. She'd had enough of that in life already. He liked her too much for that and enjoyed her company in equal measure to his desire.

Conversation with her was liberating. They spoke of things that mattered. Not weather nor fashion. It was meaningful, the stuff of consequence. In his life, he'd never met anyone he was at ease to unburden himself. Not even his mother. Nor had he encountered a woman who challenged and confounded him as she. Ginny was like no woman he'd ever known.

He suspected there was much more he had yet to know. "Ye ken, today is the first time ye've revealed anything personal about yerself to me?"

"Is it?"

She gazed at him through her lashes, bold and flirtatious. A becoming flush pinkened her cheeks. He grazed his palm down her slick leg and back up again, painfully aware of how his flesh quaked under her inquisitive hands. Coll almost forgot what they were talking about. "Aye, no' once but twice."

"Strange. Normally I excel at suppressing my feelings."

"Aye, as do I."

She cocked her head to the side with a dubious wince. "Do you though?"

The overblown skepticism in her tone made him smile. "Are ye implying that I make free wi' my emotions?"

Her arms slipped over his shoulders. An uncontrollable tremor passed through him as her breasts brushed his chest. An intoxicating rush of desire swept over him when her sweet, husky laughter teased his ears. "A few of them."

"Forgi' me if that's the case, lass. I am no' normally a man given to mawkish confessions," he told her with some seriousness. "The confidences I shared wi' ye today was unusual for me."

"You can always be honest about what you're feeling with me," she told him with equal sincerity.

Och, but she was a fair goddess. Had his life depended on it, he wouldn't have been able to imagine the faintest possibility that the two of them would arrive at this moment after the way they'd met. He slid his hand over her hip wishing it was the silk of flesh beneath his fingers and not rough linen. She wanted him. Unable to deny the passion that warmed his blood any longer, he cupped her bottom and drew her closer. There was no hiding his "emotions" now.

"Should I confess what I feel right now?"

Her smile widened, her eyes danced in the fading light. "I would love that."

He couldn't help but smile himself. How long had it been since

such gaiety eased his heartache? His loneliness? It would be unmanly to admit how trying the past year had been. Knowing how he'd broken his father's faith and his mother's heart weighed on his conscience. All he'd taken from others and all that had been taken from him were lifted by Ginny's smile. Vanquished by her laughter.

He couldn't help but want more of the tranquility that touched his soul. He wouldn't have to take it. He could share it.

A curl fell from the riotous mass on top of her head and clung to her flushed cheek. Coll tucked it behind her ear and grazed his finger down her neck and along her jaw, relishing the quiver of her flesh against his.

"Coll..."

His pulse raced at her sweet caress of his name. There were countless emotions he could catalogue for her, most more positive than they might have been a sennight past. Some beyond his ability to articulate. Clearly, she anticipated words of lust and passion.

While present, they weren't at the top of the list.

"Overthinking is my thing. Don't steal my thunder," she teased softly. "Maybe it would be easier to show rather than tell? You could start with kissing me."

"Do ye want me to?"

Why now? What had changed?

Och, he could ask his infernal questions later. Right now...ah, she was nearly naked in his arms already. It would be so easy to take her. To bury himself inside of her and turn those dreams into carnal reality.

Her smile took on a devilish bent. "I appreciate the informed consent, but do you really need an answer to that?"

Permission given, Coll could tell Ginny expected him to pounce on her like a ravenous beast, but he'd learned the best things in life were savored. Sex was one of them. The kiss of a bonny lass was another. He hadn't deprived himself for more than a year only to finish his dessert before the meal itself. Nevertheless, it was difficult to restrain himself. Her full lips were parted, ready. Kissable. He couldn't take his eyes off them, wondering if they were as soft as they appeared. As delicious.

"Mayhap I shouldnae." He was surprised by the huskiness of his voice but couldn't clear the want away. He brushed his thumb over her soft, full bottom lip, feeling her tremble under the light caress. "Mayhap I will do nae more than stare at yer mouth for an hour more and let myself imagine what ye might taste like."

His body rebelled at the thought. Her lips begged to be ravished. He didn't confess that he'd done far more than kiss her amid the erotic dreams that had plagued him each time he closed his eyes.

Her fingernails raked the scruff along his jaw. "You haven't done that already?"

Releasing her waist, he trailed his fingers over her shoulder and up the side of her neck in a light caress. A sigh escaped those lips. With an unsteady one of his own, he traced his thumb over them. The tip of her tongue teased the pad. The barest touch and desire rushed hot and urgent through his veins. She was the verist minx.

"Have ye?"

"That and more," came her feathery admission.

He met her gaze, read the hunger there and knew it matched his own. It was a wonder steam didn't rise from the water around them. Lost to the swirling longing and lust, Coll almost didn't notice the uncertainty that crept into her eyes.

"Unless you don't want me...I mean, want to kiss me." She gnawed on her lower lip. "I wouldn't want to force you into a corner —"

She truly didn't know how marvelous she was. He would do everything in his power to show her. Coll stopped her with a finger to her lips. "Wheesht, lass."

\* \* \*

If having one's lips tremble with anticipation was an actual thing, Ginny was there. Every bit of her was taut with anticipation. The haze of lust was already thick around them, hot and achy between her legs. She couldn't remember ever wanting someone so badly, so fast.

She wanted him to want it too.

"The moment I saw ye, lass, I was struck speechless," he confessed in a thick, throaty brogue. "When I awoke yesterday wi' ye in my arms, this morn when I saw ye...now. I long to taste yer lips."

Relief washed over her. "You've barely held my hand."

"I dinnae ken if you'd allow it. Nor did I want to force my affections on ye, either." A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Lest ye attempt to break my nose again."

"You're right, I wouldn't have let you then."

"But now ye would?"

She wound her legs around his hips and pressed her body flush against his. Her breasts flat against his chest. "Now I want you to."

First, she wanted him to kiss her. She could have done it, taken it for herself. But no, she wanted him to be the one to take it, to show her how the Highlanders of old took their women.

*Nice, Gin. Way to stick it to the patriarchy.*

She shooed the thought away. It might have been the most antifeminist of thoughts, she didn't care. Because she was already a little bit his. When she finally left this place, a part of her would remain behind with Cailin MacLeod.

His thumb left her lips and traced a tantalizing path over her cheekbone. His other hand smoothed down the back of her leg as she lifted it higher around his to tickle behind her knee and up again. He teased his intent before returning to her knee, pulling her even tighter against him until she could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Through it all, his eyes locked with hers, filled with wanting and making certain she knew it.

God, he was good! And he hadn't really done anything yet.

"What has changed, lass?"

"Everything."

He caught her chin and drew her mouth to his until there was but a hairsbreadth between them. He hesitated, fed her anticipation until Ginny thought she would scream. Electricity snapped as his lips grazed hers. Her breath caught—

What an understatement! The whole freakin' world stopped spinning!

He lingered, tasted as promised, then parted her lips and leaned into it as if something snapped within him.

In her entire life, she'd never been kissed like that before. As if he were dying for it. As if nothing else mattered.

In that moment, nothing did.

Ginny's eyes fluttered closed and she surrendered to the ardor that threatened to drown her. He took that kiss in a way that consumed entirely without invading at all. His tongue tasted and teased her tender lips but went no further. A hint of whisky left her heady and hungry for more. Their breath mingled like a rush of desperation. Her lips throbbed and a wave of euphoria left her dizzy. She was so undone by that single, simple kiss that it took a full minute to register what she'd seen before she closed her eyes.

She broke away, panting hard. For a moment, she stared at him reading the same shock and wonder in his eyes before she forced herself to look away.

Out over the loch to the west...a silhouette against the fiery sky...

Yes, that's what she'd seen.

"Coll, there's a ship out there."

## Chapter 22

“Is it a French ship?” Ginny tugged her clothes on over her dripping shift. Without the sun or Coll to warm her, goosebumps erupted down her arms and legs. Her blood was ice water in her veins from the cold.

Or was it fear?

Coll looked grim as he belted his kilt. “There’s nae way to tell from here.”

This was it. She knew it. There was no mention of this in the history books and old Donald MacLeod had said inside that a French ship couldn’t get past all the English vessels out there. Ergo, that wasn’t the French coming to rescue Prince Charlie and free Ginny from her obligation to right whatever wrong she’d done. It was an English warship en route to alter history as she knew it.

What had drawn them in? Had it been the gunshots earlier that day or had a lookout with a spyglass spotted her playing on the beach? Given the blame Donell placed ever so heavily on her shoulders, she had to believe it was the latter.

She had done this. She’d caught their attention and reeled them in. Now she had to figure out how to fix it.

First things first. “We need to get to Prince Charlie and hide him.”

“He may already have retired to the cottage at Glenbeasdale for the night,” Coll told her as they scrambled up the rocky embankment. “It will no’ be the first place they look.”

“What do you mean? He’s staying at the manor, isn’t he?”

“He decided to sleep at the cottage for greater security.”

Right, because of the bug O’Sullivan put in his ear, Prince Charlie didn’t trust anyone.

In retrospect, Ginny supposed he shouldn’t have trusted her. Because of her, all hell was about to rain down on his head. She swore under her breath as they clung to the cover of the trees and hurried back to the manor. Without *looking* like they were hurrying. No need to rouse suspicion by running if the commander of that vessel wasn’t already there.

Luckily the prince was still at the manor, though the hall looked like the English had already sacked it. A small card table was on its side, chairs strewn to the corners. Prince Charlie stood in the center of the room making the sign of the cross over the motionless bodies of MacDonald and MacEachine while he solemnly intoned:

*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine;*

*Domine, exaudi vocem meam.*

*Fiant aures tuæ intendentes in vocem deprecationis meæ.*

*Si iniquitates observaveris, Domine, Domine, quis sustinebit?*

“Oh my God!” Ginny clapped her hands over her mouth. “Is he...is he giving them last rites?”

“Close. ’Tis *De Profundis*. The prayer for the dead, Psalm 130,” Coll told her as he knelt by the MacDonald’s side then checked MacEachine. “And they’re no’ dead. They’re utterly blootered.”

As was the prince. The urgency of the moment took to the winds...akin to the three—make it five—sheets to the wind she estimated Prince Charlie had flapping. As humor was inappropriate in that precise moment, she stifled her laughter. Unable to suppress it entirely, it emerged as a snort.

Coll looked up and she could see the same war of amusement versus earnestness in his eyes.

“Dinnae laugh, lass, ye’ll only encourage him.”

He called for a servant to fetch the others while Ginny did her best to corral the prince.

“Showed them what a true wager looks like,” Prince Charlie said with pride. “’Twas simple, you see. If they believed a woman could shoot a gun, no doubt they thought they could out-drink a prince.”

She refrained from reminding him that he’d lost the gamble of girls versus guns earlier. Gathering up his discarded jacket and cravat, she took him by the arm and tried to steer him toward the door. “Only a fool would think they could best you, sir. Unfortunately, there’s no time to celebrate your victory. English soldiers are coming. We have to leave.”

“Retreat, retreat. MacLeod what are our other options again?”

“There are nae other options, yer highness,” Coll assured him. “The enemy is upon us.”

“Pish, it cannot be.” He waved a dismissive hand. “I have Miss Hughes to warn me of impending danger.”

“Yes, and I’m warning you right now, sir, as promised.” Ginny cast a helpless look at Coll who was, with the servant’s help, righting the tables and chairs and propping the other two men into a tableau that suggested they were the only two present that night. “Please, we must find a place to hide before they find you.”

Thuds on the stairs preceded the arrival of O’Sullivan and Father MacDonald. They were pulling on their clothes and fastening buttons as they went. Coll explained the situation and Ginny propelled the prince toward O’Sullivan.

The Irishman took Prince Charlie’s coat and coaxed a royal arm into the sleeve. “Could be a French ship. Perhaps King Louis has sent

it.”

“It isn’t.”

Perhaps it was the finality in her clipped response that convinced him. She could see him running possible scenarios through his mind. “How many could fit in a longboat? A score?”

Ginny gaped at him. “You can’t be thinking of fighting our way out of this? Killing English soldiers would only alert the rest of them to our presence.”

“Aye,” Coll leapt in to back her up. “Besides, we dinnae ken if there is more than one ship out there. There may be a whole armada.”

O’Sullivan’s lip curled. He could have been itching for a fight after his confrontation with Coll earlier or resenting a woman—or anyone other than himself—employing superior logic. What bosom pals he and Luke would be. “There’s a chance we could make a clean escape.”

“Are ye willing to bet his life on it?” Coll snapped.

“Yes, five shillings,” the prince announced. “Our standard wager. Isn’t that so, MacLeod?”

“As ye say, yer highness.”

Burke was the last to join them. He’d thought to remove the remainder of their personal effects from the bedchambers when no one else had. Among them, Ginny’s cloak and bag and Coll’s leather sheath and sword. Ginny studied Prince Charlie to determine if there were anything of his that may have been left at the cottage where he slept. He didn’t look like he was missing anything.

“Any idea where we can hide?” Burke asked the room at large but his eyes were on her.

Ginny, the supposed seer with all the answers.

Thankfully, as though she’d been granted the gift of sight in fact rather than fiction, the perfect solution manifested itself.

And if she was correct, historically accurate one, to boot.

“I know the perfect place.”

## Chapter 23

*The shore of Loch Nan Uamh  
April 26, 1746*

"I'm telling ye we should wait 'til the morrow to set out," Donald MacLeod grouched as they loaded the boat he'd retrieved for the prince's escape. "There's a storm in the offing. It could well be the death of us."

"Another night in that cave may be the death of us. Continue loading the boat," Prince Charlie commanded. "Come what may, we are all accepting we may die."

"Not all of us."

Ginny grinned at Burke as he passed by with the last of their possessions. Five days crammed into a small hollow—if it wasn't the exact historical site known in her time as Prince Charlie's Cave before, it probably was now—had made bears of them all. She'd brought as many diversions as possible from the manor, including playing cards. There'd been enjoyable hours spent with Burke who taught her piquet and graced her with surprisingly philosophical conversation. She'd truly come to appreciate him over the past several days for his kindness and counsel. Under his guise of a grumpy old fart, she thought he felt the same.

She would miss him, perhaps all of them. After the veritable hell of the past week, the realization came as something of a surprise. Be that as it may, old MacLeod's return with a sturdy boat and seven men to row it across the Minch was a welcome one.

As she'd assumed and as Donell predicted, it had indeed been an English ship, one she'd likely directed right to the prince. Royalist soldiers crawled all over Arisaig for days after but never found them hidden in the cave she'd discovered among the boulders on the beach. Luckily, with their old friend darkness once again disguising their movements, they'd been able to reach it that night without being detected.

MacDonald and MacEachine had been questioned and Borrodale Manor thoroughly searched. Harmless, inconspicuous lass that she was, in Prince Charlie's words, Ginny was sent out on recognizance missions to determine what the soldiers knew and didn't know about his presence there.

"Do not advertise yourself," he'd told her. "Discover what news



you can and report back. Should anyone come near the entrance of our haven, lure them away by any means necessary. For king and country.”

Coll had stopped her before she departed with a grim-faced reminder that Prince Charlie was not her sovereign and Scotland not her homeland.

While she appreciated the excuse, she had a few of her own. Patriotism only went so far and surely if it came to that, there had to be another way of distracting a man that didn't involve prostituting herself for the sake of written history.

Thankfully it never came to that.

“We are most grateful that the Almighty chose to place you in our path, Miss Hughes.” Prince Charlie caught Ginny's hand and lifted it to his lips. “Most grateful indeed.”

“Because I cooked for you?” she teased him.

He grinned with boyish charm. He asked for her assurance and believed wholeheartedly in her avowal that whatever trials he might face in the months ahead, he would safely return to France. “Heavens, no. Despite that.”

“Are you hinting I lack the skill to properly wield a skillet?”

“If he's no', I am,” Edmund Burke muttered upon his return.

When testosterone overload compelled her to leave, she gathered food and drink donated by local sympathizers or from the manor for the men, as much as she could carry. She'd made trips to the village where she bought blood sausage from the butcher in the village with the coin she'd stolen from her sister and attempted to garner as much intelligence as possible without drawing suspicion from the enemy militia.

Food delivery had led to the responsibility to cook for the men. It had been so long since she'd been camping, her skills at cooking over an open fire weren't what they once were. The payback for foisting the duty on the only woman among them had been to almost smoke them out of the cave.

Hence, what had become something of an ongoing joke between her and Burke.

She smiled after the older man with affection. “I remain undeterred, Mr. Burke. I shall impress you yet.”

“I doubt it, lass, but I hope we meet again to gi' ye the chance.”

Ginny longed to hug him but doubted the older man was one for public displays of affection. She settled for clasping his hand. “Goodbye, Mr. Burke. Take care of yourself.”

His fingers curled around hers before he released her. “Ye, as well, lass.”

“Try not to throw O'Sullivan overboard.”

He grinned. "Nae promises."

Once Burke left them, Prince Charlie turned to her with a look that was at once imperious and uncertain. "Am I wrong to insist we leave now? Tell me what you see."

"It's not going to be an easy crossing, but you will make it. Trust in Donald MacLeod," she told him. Gnawing her lip, she considered pushing a little further then decided to go for it. "Your days ahead will be rough, your highness. Whatever else, keep the faith knowing you will succeed in the end. Most importantly, I want you to know that what I said once before is true. Despite a reward of thirty thousand pounds on your head, no one you meet will betray you, no matter what you are told to the contrary. I would ask you to remember that."

He glanced to the boat where Old MacLeod and the Irishman continued to gripe about the weather and witchcraft respectively. "I will keep it in mind. Farewell, Miss Hughes. Godspeed."

"Goodbye, your highness."

Prince Charlie, Father Allan MacDonald, MacEachine, Burke and a Captain O'Neill who'd returned with the elder MacLeod boarded the boat. Coll waded into the water and pushed against the bow until the keel was freed from the lakebed. The seven oarsmen MacLeod recruited drew back the oars and propelled them out into the loch.

Coll did not jump aboard to join them as she'd feared he might. Instead, he strode back up the beach, his wet kilt flapping around his knees. He dragged his hands through his hair pushing it back from his forehead. The sight of him took Ginny's breath.

Maybe it always would.

Whatever *always* could be defined as. A night longer, or in her dreams forever.

"You're really not going with them."

"Nay, I've done as duty and my uncle bade." He reached her side and turned as she did to watch the boat. "I am glad yer part in this is finished, lass. I should apologize for ever involving ye. I could never forgi' myself if my shortsighted impulse brought ye harm."

"It's fine. Everything worked out all right in the end."

She'd saved the prince from discovery and he would soon be on his way to freedom. She'd done her part and double checked the facts.

History was back on track.

And there was no time like the present to seize the opportunity to cap off this adventure. There were no ships in sight. Heavy cloud cover to further darken the night sky would mask their departure no matter what weather awaited them.

Given the accounts she'd read, it would be bad. Thankfully, she would not be joining them. As far as she could tell, she hadn't inadvertently screwed anything else up. Barring a message written

from her future self in the sand informing her all had *not* gone as planned and telling her to get on the freakin' boat, she wouldn't have to face the possibility. Her part of this misadventure would soon be over.

What remained between her and Coll was something else entirely.

Silence fell until only the light of the lantern swinging from the bowsprit was visible in the darkness. His fingers brushed hers, then entangled with them. His touch was electric. Tempting.

Though there'd been no opportunity for intimate banter, they'd probably logged a hundred hours of conversation. Sitting side by side with their backs to the cave wall, they talked about everything and nothing. About books and the best places in Edinburgh to find them. About life in the Colonies and the places she'd been. They shared stories of their childhoods—heavily edited on her part for obvious reasons—and talked about their respective time at university. Him with a classical education at the University of St. Andrews and her time at Temple that led her to teaching history. His interest in colonial schoolrooms an interesting parallel to Tris's questions of the same.

In a way, he reminded her of Tris in the way he listened and asked questions with sincere interest. Something had been lost in modern conversation. Or perhaps people simply didn't care as much. Coll gave her his full attention and met her eye. His fingers would thread through hers as they did now. A simple joining of hands that had come to represent something far more than physical attraction.

As wonderful as that time had been, the limitations had been unsatisfying at best.

Ginny longed to relive that moment in the loch before she'd spotted the ship in real time. To savor the kiss that had haunted her through all the days and endless nights since. Had it really been so spectacular or had she blown it up in her mind?

This was her chance to find out.

Unfortunately, at the moment, his mind was elsewhere.

"If I ask ye something, will ye answer me honestly?"

She looked up at him. "I can try."

His lips pursed then relaxed. He continued to stare after the boat. "Those things ye said to Prince Charlie at Invergarry about his sword and targe..."

"Please don't ask me again how I knew."

His head shook in denial. "No' that. He also asked ye whether he would return and win this war one day. Ye said aye. That was a lie."

Confusion furrowed between her brows. "What?"

Finally, he looked down at her raising a quizzical brow, the questions intensifying his normally warm gaze. "I could hear the truth in most of what ye said, but no' in that. That was yer only lie. Och,

dinnae deny it. As I've said, ye're a terrible liar."

Ginny stalled, searching her mind for an out that didn't have her racing through time away from him when there was so much more she wanted to share with him. "I'm sorry, was there a question in there?"

He gestured to the loch. "Will they make it?"

"They will."

"Will Prince Charlie return?"

"Coll, please..."

"Nay, then?" He stalled her with a raised hand. "How do ye ken?"

Ginny rolled her eyes with broad exaggeration. "Are we back to this again?"

A muscle jumped in his whiskered cheek. Clearly he was clenching his teeth. A deep breath lifted his shoulders. When he released it, they dropped again more relaxed now. Shaking his head, he drew a finger along the line of her jaw with a tight smile. "Ye'll recall, I never was completely satisfied by yer explanation."

She shivered at his touch. Right now, she was recalling any number of things. Many to do with satisfaction and few that harkened back to his interrogations.

"As I recall it, our conversation about satisfaction had little to do with explanations," she said.

His big body tensed. Even in the light of the lone lantern, she could see his eyes darken. It wasn't curiosity that consumed him any longer.

"I suppose—" Her voice already husky with longing. She cleared her throat. "I suppose you could try to force me to talk."

He cast her a sidelong glance. "And how would I go about that?"

Without looking at him—lest he see her surrender written all over her face—she trailed her fingers along the palm of his hand. That simple touch, the glide of flesh against flesh roused the need for more. "I don't know, you've been torturing me for days already. What more could you do?"

"Have I?"

Standing here when there were so many better things they could be doing was torture, too. If she were being honest with herself, if he said he'd only kiss her again if she told him, she'd spill the entire truth without hesitation.

"You're better at it than you might think."

## Chapter 24

Admittedly, it had been a long while since he'd lain with a woman. Longer still since he'd employed any sort of sexual innuendo. In fact, Coll's skills were so rusty he didn't initially comprehend where this bizarre exchange was leading. Ginny glanced up at him through her lashes and his cock twitched, understanding the signs long before his mind.

When she caught her bottom lip between her teeth though...

Pulse racing, a shaky exhale passed his lips. Och, his mind caught up quick enough summoning all manner of torture he could employ to make her talk.

Or make her scream.

Even in the light of the single lantern left behind, he could see the flush creep up her cheeks. Was she ashamed of her words or the desire that provoked her to tease him? She should feel neither. Then again, Ginny couldn't know how her words affected him.

She turned her head, refusing to meet his eye. The long creamy length of her neck begged for his touch. His lips. Unable to resist the temptation, Coll bent his head and traced the visible flutter of her pulse with his tongue. She shuddered under the light caress and turned her head to allow him further access.

After a week of denied temptation, he couldn't resist the invitation. Her skin was sweet, salty from the sea air. Her heady, womanly scent teased his senses. Raking his teeth upward, Coll reveled in the helpless shiver that ran through her.

Och, as much as he might regret dragging her into the danger of their mission, he couldn't regret her being here with him now. The past week had been hell. Stuck in the compact discomfort of that infernal cave whilst Ginny risked herself for them. Each time she left the cavern, it had been all he could do not to follow. To ensure her safety.

And more.

His body burned with desire. He hungered for another taste of her lips. Yearned for the chance to taste the rest of her. To map her body and claim her for himself. And maybe find some peace with her at his side.

"Will you kiss me again, Coll?" The request was barely a whisper.

He nipped at her jaw, caught her chin to force her to face him. Quick, shallow breaths escaped past her parted lips. Her eyes were

closed, dark lashes fanned against her cheeks.

“Open yer eyes, lass.”

Her lashes fluttered, her eyes opened to reveal the passion written there.

“I want more than a mere kiss from ye, ye ken that? I hunger to take ye.”

When she took a step back, his heart sank. Then she took another, still holding his hand, reminding him of the tug of enticement the merest contact with her generated. Another step and another until their arms were outstretched. Turning she cast a seductive smile over her shoulder and released him.

His heart rebounded and soared. He knew she intended him to follow in her footsteps like a pup on a lead as she sauntered away, hips swaying hypnotically. It would serve her right if he held back, made her realize that, as a man, he would not be so easily led.

But he was and Ginny deserved a man who wasn't afraid to show how much he wanted her.

The gentle tug became an undeniable pull. In three long strides, Coll caught up with her and swept her off her feet, into his arms...and kept right on walking.

“Coll!”

“Wheesht before I put ye over my shoulder again.”

She shuddered at his savage growl. He didn't believe it was fear that embraced her. The realization fired his blood even more.

“Or over your knee?”

Her provocative tone more than the imagery her words roused in his mind almost brought him to his knees. There were a thousand things he wanted to do to her. With her. Privacy and a bedchamber be damned. Coll couldn't wait any longer to ravish that wicked mouth of hers.

Dropping her legs, he propelled her back against the sheer face of the rock embankment and stared down at her. He panted, his lungs burning as if he'd run a mile. He traced his finger over her bottom lip. “Ye've a naughty mouth on ye, lass.”

Ginny was as breathless as he. She ran her hands up his chest. “And you're a proper naughty lad to be reading what you are into my words.”

“Ye think ye can see inside my mind?”

“God, I hope so.”

This time she didn't tease and provoke. This time she took the kiss she wanted and Coll was glad to surrender to it. Her lips parted, her tongue grazed his bottom lip and dipped into his mouth to parry with his. With a groan, he forced her back against the rock and plundered her sweet mouth with all the suppressed desire of the last few days.

Incessant, unrelenting days of yearning, wanting to continue that first kiss.

To take so much more.

\* \* \*

*Holy shit, girl!*

*I know, right?*

Those were Ginny's last cognizant thoughts before a whirlwind of rapture stole everything from her. Her thoughts. Her breath. Whatever good sense she had left.

All that remained was wanting. Longing.

Never had she been so consumed, so spellbound as she was in the moment. Her entire consciousness was narrowed down to the play of Coll's lips on hers. The electric brush of his tongue along hers, the voltaic spark of his lips on hers that left them throbbing. She wanted to experience that sizzle everywhere.

As if reading her mind, he dragged his mouth from hers and skimmed his lips across her cheek. Her breath hitched when he nipped her ear. Down her neck, a path of lightning in his wake. An overwhelming rush of blood to her head left her dizzy and clinging to his shoulders for support.

Stripping her of her bodice—when had he unlaced it?—he pulled the tie of her shift and tugged it off her shoulder. A low, ravenous groan reverberated through his chest.

"Ye're no' wearing yer stays, lass."

"No, I am not," she confirmed.

She arched against his palms as he cupped her breasts. His hands were like fiery brands even through her shift. He bent his head and nipped at the crook of her neck. Lightning shot through her and a cry of rapture escaped her, one so desperate you would have thought he'd done something far more drastic.

Ginny wanted that something more. The connection that had been missing from her life for so long. The passion two bodies coming together could generate. The sense of fulfillment and completion found in romance novels and rom-coms. She yearned for it. All of it.

Something only Coll could give her.

And she wanted to savor every moment of it.

When she felt her skirt being inched up, Ginny dragged her mouth away from his. As thrilling as it would be to be fiercely taken against these rocks, beneath a turbulent sky to the thunder that echoed the pounding of her heart, she wanted more than that.

Before she could find the words to express all that, a raindrop plopped down on her cheek. A herald of the storm old MacLeod had predicted.

Coll scowled up at the sky as if it had somehow betrayed him.

“The rain is coming. We need to find shelter.”

“Where?” There would be no privacy at Borrodale House. The inns of Arisaig were too far away. Ginny could think of the perfect place. A quaint inn just the press of a button away. She would love to tangle with him in the sheets in the canopy bed where she’d fantasized about this not long ago. If there was a guarantee it wouldn’t distract him completely and arouse questions certain to temper his passion, she would take him there in a heartbeat.

“Prince Charlie’s cottage in Glenpean is close by,” Coll suggested.

Another fat raindrop fell on his forehead, then another.

“The cave is closer.”

Coll fetched the lantern and was right behind her as she crawled on all fours into the mouth of the cave. The first few yards were like a human-sized warren before the cave opened up. The lantern illuminated the cramped space and the blankets left behind. Her cloak and bag were bundled next to the one Coll had used. She’d barely reached it when he caught her hips and flipped her over. He lifted himself over her. His eyes were hot, his features so taut with lingering desire it was almost as if he’d been chiseled from the rock surrounding them. He was so achingly gorgeous she couldn’t resist cradling his face in her hands. Rough whiskers teased the pads of her thumbs. An erotic tickle that sent electric charges up her arms.

“I’ve thought of naught but this for the past four days. Do ye want this, lass?”

“I’ve been waiting for this,” she confessed. For four days, one hour, and about twenty minutes, but who was counting? He reached for the laces of her skirt, but Ginny shook her head. “You first. I want to see you, Coll. All of you.”

He bent his head to capture her mouth in a drowning kiss then reared back until he was on his knees straddling her hips. Ginny tentatively rested her hands on his bare thighs, tracing the steely bands of muscle. His jaw tightened with a hiss. He tugged on his cravat and flung it aside. “All?”

“Every bit.”

His smile flashed. Shrugging out of his coat, he unbuttoned his waistcoat and removed it. Then pulled his shirt over his head slowly enough for her to savor each inch as it was exposed. To watch his muscles flex and stretch in the flickering light. The ripple of his abs, the bunching of his pecs. The massive breadth of his shoulders and bulge of his biceps as he balled up the shirt and tossed it aside. Every hollow of his sculpted torso was accented by the shadows cast over him.

He was magnificent. Beautiful. There wasn’t a pagan god on Mount Olympus or in the halls of Valhalla who could compare.



He leaned over to kiss her again. And again, he worked the knot on her skirt.

*“Every bit, I said.”*

“We’ll get there, lass. But tit for tat, aye?” His lips teased her earlobe. “I want to see ye, as well. Every bit.”

Untying her skirt, he pushed it over her hips and down her legs. Ginny helped kick it aside. Before the moment could be ruined by any questions regarding her footwear, she sat up to rid herself of the problem as fast as she could. She pushed them to the side, covering them with her socks. He pushed her back bit by bit as his rough hands retraced their path. Kneading her hips, cupping her bottom. Through her shift he kissed her belly, raked his teeth over her hip bone. Up her ribs, she flinched as his mouth teased. Yelped when he caught her nipple between his teeth.

“Am I hurting ye, lass?”

“No.”

Each touch was electric and new. Her heart pounded so hard her chest was quaking. Even through the linen, each caress left her trembling until it seemed her whole body was aquiver. Reaching his starting point, Coll began again, pulling her shift over her shoulders and downward. His mouth followed, the scruff of his beard chafing her tender breasts.

He sat back once more, gazing down at her with a groan on his lips and hunger in his eyes. “Ye’re lovely, Ginny. Perfect. Truly.”

After years of backhanded flattery, it was difficult for her to accept compliments at face value.

It was all part of the fairy tale.

“Ye cannae ken how ye’ve bewitched me.”

“I thought we’d already established that I don’t study the dark arts.”

“I beg to disagree.”

His calloused hands covered her breasts again, squeezing and tweaking her sensitive nipples. A throaty cry escaped her. Threading her fingers through his shaggy hair, she begged him for more and he complied. His lips replaced his hand, she felt it down her belly. Flicking the tender nub with his tongue, he suckled deep. Her body bowed as if she’d been shocked.

“Oh my God.” He might as well have had that mouth far lower; the effect was one and the same.

As if he’d read her thoughts and saw them as a challenge, Coll lifted her hips and slid her shift over them. He rained a trail of hot kisses down her rib cage and belly, again nipping at her hip, before he eased downward.

Holy crap! Ginny inhaled a shaky breath as her head swam. Blood

pumped hot through her veins, every nerve tingling. Every inch of her trembling, needy. Oh, so desperate. How had he driven her so far, so fast?

“What are you doing to me?” The question emerged unbidden, an intoxicated slur of words.

“Do ye have to ask?” His tone teased. Damn, he sounded pleased with himself.

He had every right.

Her thighs quivered under his hands as he urged them apart. She flinched as his breath teased her, his finger traced the line of her folds. Ginny stiffened, bracing herself for the onslaught. A keening moan rose in volume as his tongue followed the path of his finger. Electricity zinged through her, already an achy throbbing radiated outward. What insanity was this? Shit, she was going to come before he even touched anything of consequence.

Coll knew it, too. His soft chuckle caressed her before his tongue circled her clit and he sucked hard, nearly ending it all right there. With a hard kiss to her inner thigh, he rose and unbuckled his belt.

“Ye ken, wearing a kilt as a man does disnae necessitate removing it for most activities,” his husky brogue aroused her almost as much as his touch. “Ye said every bit though, so I will oblige ye.”

First he shed his brogues and stockings, then he turned his attention to unwrapping the bright blue and green plaid from around his hips. Ginny hardly got more than a peek before he crawled over her once more. What she couldn't see, she could touch. Relishing the prickle of hair against her palms, she ran her hands over his hard chest and down the ridges of his abs. With some satisfaction, she felt the tremor that swept through him when her finger grazed his ridged erection.

She could happily touch him forever just to feel that reaction and knowing she was the one who had him trembling.

“Och, ye're a witch in truth, lass,” he growled before his mouth claimed hers in such an overwhelming kiss, she felt faint.

“I think we could argue about who put a spell on who.”

## Chapter 25

Coll fought back a smile. Humor was not something he generally experienced in the bedchamber. He should have expected it with Ginny as she'd already thrown every normality of his experience with women into chaos. She'd surprised him again and again.

Never as much as she did here within this cave. He'd never known a woman so responsive to the lightest touch. She was earthy, sensual, offering herself with abandon. Her lush body fairly vibrated beneath his hands, begging for more. Her pulse raced beneath his lips. As did his, in turn. He was so attuned to her reactions, each one was an erotic caress with the merest contact.

He was so sensitive to her, he couldn't help but notice her change of mood when he settled between her plump thighs.

"What is it, Ginny? Do ye no' want this after all?"

It would pain him mightily if she said no. He'd walk—nay, limp—away without argument. He wanted her to want him as much as he wanted her.

"I do," she assured him, running her hands over his shoulders. "It's only that I thought...that is..." She gnawed on her lip as if trying to find the best way to explain it. "I was so close."

"Aye." He smoothed her hair away from her face unable to contain his smile. Her impending climax so obvious he'd nearly lost control himself. "I ken. I want to share it wi' ye."

A scornful snort reverberated through the chamber. "Yeah, right."

The cynical huff of laughter that followed confounded him. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry." She squeezed her eyes shut and gave a rigid shake of her head. Opening them again, she ran her hands up his arms with what he was certain she thought was an inviting smile. "It'll be fine. Wonderful. Do you want to...um, continue?"

"Verra much so, but no' until I understand yer reservation."

"I have no reservations about this. About you and me," she assured him.

That much he believed. "What is it then?"

"I was just thinking there would be more foreplay."

He didn't understand her meaning. "I can feel yer heat. I ken ye're wet and ready for me."

She moaned at his words. Aye, she was hungry for him.

"I know. It's just...well, you know. Without foreplay, I won't..."

That is,” She shrugged, her face red. “The vaginal orgasm is a myth.”

Coll blinked, certain he couldn't have heard her right. “Beg pardon?”

Ginny squirmed under his gaze. “I think it's pretty self-explanatory.”

A low chuckle built up in his chest. He fought it back though amusement was preferable to nursing the anger that began to churn inside him for her piggish former husband. Such a selfish, inconsiderate bastard probably never gave her pleasure any consideration. He deserved to be dragged from hell and beaten to death once again for so negatively coloring her experience.

A consideration for another time. For now, he had a simple truth to prove.

Skimming his hand over her silky hip and down her sleek thigh, he lifted her leg until it was around his hip and settled deeper into the hot cradle between them.

“I think we can do better than fine, lass.” He brushed kisses across her shoulder and down to suckle on her turgid nipple. He hardened anew at her harsh intake of breath. “Better than that.” Dipping his hand between her thighs, Coll circled her weeping opening and gloried in her sweet, passionate moan. “Better than that. Trust me. Should I fail, I will spend the night through making it up to ye.”

“With a promise like that...”

Coll couldn't deny a tormented groan of his own when she ran her hands down his back to his arse to show her assent. To prove to him how hard it would be to fulfill his promise. Persevere he would.

He wanted more than acceptance however, he wanted participation. Bending his head, he covered her mouth with his, teasing her with his tongue and teeth until she sighed and melted beneath him. He persisted until Ginny returned his kiss with equal fervor, her arms tight around him. It was not enough. He wanted her passion on par with his own. He wanted her body aflame. Her hunger as ravenous as his own. Without touching her anywhere else, he coaxed and teased until she grew restless beneath him.

“Damn it, Col—”

Her words dissolved into a ragged scream as he drove into her hot, tight body. He bit back one of his own, fighting the fierce need to plunder her depths and spill himself in haste. Her lissome body bowed as he began to move inside her. A slow, languid glide at odds with the animalistic need clawing within. He would carry on for however long it took. Coll should have known that extraordinary attraction between them would burn brighter than either of them had imagined.

Soon Ginny writhed beneath him, her nails digging into his back. Shifting slightly, he lifted her hips and changed the angle of his

thrusts. He watched her face to gauge her reaction. Her gasp told him all he needed to know. She was closer than she knew. The knowledge filled him with primal exhilaration.

Her body strained against him, met him. Lush thighs locked around his hips. Faster, harder he drove into her, reining in his fervent lust to satisfy hers. It was no longer him alone. Ginny was with him, driving their passion. Sharing their rapture.

Then she began to swear. Awed profanities of disbelief that became an erotic mantra on her lips. She truly hadn't thought it possible. Coll hadn't thought it possible to be so utterly consumed by a woman. It went beyond the carnal. Her limbs quaked. Her chant melted into impassioned moans. Wide-eyed, she stared up at him in wonder. She began to contract around him—hot, velvety. Throwing back her head, she bit her lip and closed her eyes.

“Nay, lass,” he demanded...begged. He wanted to watch her expressive eyes when she came. “Look at me.” She shook her head. “Please.”

She did and he saw the turmoil there. “Coll...oh God!”

“Aye, *mo ghrá*. Ye feel it. Come wi' me.”

She did, reaching her apex with a strangled, rapturous cry. She convulsed around him. That was all it took for Coll to surrender. With one last thrust, he roared his release, let it strip everything from him and fulfill him at the same time.

Before he collapsed on top of her and crushed her beneath him, Coll pressed a kiss to Ginny's lips, reveling in her panting breaths before he laid down beside her and pulled her on top of him.

Contentment washed over him. Nay, not mere contentment. He felt fucking *good*. Alive. It had been a long time since he'd felt like this. This was what he'd been missing for the past year. Not the mere body of a lass beneath him. It was far more than that. Ginny was the eye of the storm. Peace amid a constant battle. Peace of mind amid constant turbulence. A sense of home when he thought all was lost.

\* \* \*

Ginny was almost too far gone to register Coll's tender kiss, or even the sweaty, heaving chest she rested her cheek against. She did notice the frantic pounding of his heart, however. It brought a smile to her lips...her tender, swollen lips.

“I think we can safely dispel that myth.”

He hadn't only invalidated the myth, he'd done so with astonishing prowess. Never in her life had she been driven to such an extraordinary pinnacle of euphoria and repletion. Either innate carnal skill had decayed over the centuries or some men simply had more skills. Might be something to confer with her sister about.

Or maybe it was Coll. The two of them together. Rare and

wonderful.

“’Twas nae myth, lass,” he murmured into her hair. “Yer husband was a fool and an arse.”

If Luke had been, then so were the small handful of other guys she’d slept with before him. Age and inexperience had to have had a hand in it, though Coll was about the same age as Luke. Her ex used to brag about how much game he had before he settled into monogamy. He’d made certain she knew it.

Even if he’d never demonstrated it.

It didn’t matter now. The past was the past. Or in this case, the past was the present. Ginny wanted to revel in it and experience that unbelievable, magical moment with Coll at least two or three more times before the night was through. Store up enough detailed memories of him—of the explosive chemistry between them—to see her through many years to come.

The years without him.

A poignant ache radiated out from the center of her chest at the thought of leaving him behind. Foolish girl, she scolded herself. It had only been ten days of her life. She would get over it.

And look on the bright side, he hadn’t only given her something to dream about for weeks and maybe even months to come. He presented her with a glimmer of hope that there were, in fact, good men to be found in the world...or at least within the boundaries of Scotland. Maybe in any time, not just this one.

Coll’s arm tightened around her shoulder. “Ye’re quiet, lass.”

Ginny lifted her head and propped her chin on his chest. “And quiet is bad?”

He twirled a lock of hair around his finger with a soft smile. “Wi’ ye? Aye, ’tis suspicious if naught else. What are ye thinking?”

“I’m thinking...” She circled a finger through the springy hair on his chest as if contemplating her words. “It must have been a fluke.”

His brow furrowed. God, he was so gorgeous in the dim light. Shadows cast over his defined features made him seem even more of a dream come to life than he already was. “What must have been?”

Ignoring his question, she eased herself up until she straddled his hips and spread her hands across his broad, chiseled chest with mock thoughtfulness. “I think...” She caught her lip between her teeth to hide her grin. “No, I know.”

“Ken what?” His hands cupped her breasts and he lifted his head to taste them.

“In the interest of science, I believe we’ll need to test your conclusion again.” He raised one inquisitive brow. “That the myth isn’t true.”

“Ah.” He nodded and Ginny shivered as his calloused hands slid

up her legs. "Ye think my deduction is flawed?" His fingers splayed out, teasing the curls at the juncture of her thighs. "Odd, since ye agreed wi' me."

"You must had heard me wr-wrong." She gasped against the jolt of pleasure that shot through her. His hands retreated and a shaky exhale accompanied the descent.

"By all means, then, we maun verify the science." He drew her down for another kiss.

It was more than a meeting of lips. It was a convergence of desire and emotion, clenching at something long forgotten and radiating outward with almost painful sweetness. Touching something deep within her. Something that hadn't been touched in years.

Or never been touched at all.

She could kiss him forever and never regret a minute of it. Yet she wanted so much more, something she couldn't put a finger on, even knowing the pleasure he could give her. Seeking that elusive something, she repositioned herself and eased down on his steely erection. A helpless, drawn out moan of longing and yearning escaped her lips, only to be caught by his. It accompanied her descent until he was deep within her. So deep. So hard.

"Aye, lass." Coll's groan rumbled through his chest beneath her hands. His hands caught her hips and urged her farther down as his hips strained up. "Ye're incredible, *mo ghrá*."

*No, he was.*

Ginny lifted herself and slid down. Again, setting a slow rhythm. Never had anything felt so good. So right. Her desire was a physical weight in her belly. Aching. Reaching outward, through her limbs until that agonizing sweetness encompassed her. Her blood ran hot, but there was no frantic rush this time. No sprint to the finish.

There was Coll and the soul-shattering bliss of being one with him.

She collapsed against his heaving chest, trembling to her toes with the force of her orgasm. His hands continued to sweep over her, soothing and oddly arousing. Words flowed from his lips in a rough, satiated murmur. Foreign words, yet she thought they expressed all the wonder and affection she couldn't verbalize herself.

She would treasure the time she shared with him forever.

"What will you do now, Coll?" She felt his huff of humor. Before he could remark on the numerous other things and positions they could do together, she added, "Will you return to Dunchleach?"

His fingers threaded through her hair, toying with one tangled strand. "Return home, I suppose." Another pause. "What of ye, lass?"

"The same, I guess."

Ginny was none too thrilled by the prospect. Back home. Back in

range of Luke's persistent pursuit. She thought of the time travel device and all the possibilities it represented. With it, she could follow Brontë's example and explore time after time. Era after era. A week ago, the thought may have thrilled. Now?

With some time to reflect, she knew that would mean a lifetime of running away from her problem rather than facing it head-on. That was no way to live her life.

Moreover, there could be no time to compare to the one she'd discovered here. Drawing circles on his chest with her fingertips, she pondered the existence of another man in any era who could ever match him. Where did she go from here?

"De ye think to return to the Colonies?" Coll asked. "Or ye said ye had family here, aye?"

She nuzzled the base of his neck to avoid that unanswerable question. A low moan vibrated beneath her lips and his hand fisted in her hair. She'd only meant to distract him, not herself.

He hadn't been so thoroughly distracted as she might have hoped, however. Rolling with her, he laid on one side and propped his head up with one hand.

"There is another option. Ye could stay wi' me."

His hand swept up her thigh and over her hip and she leaned into it like a cat inviting someone to pet it. Staying for a while was definitely something she could get behind. As thoroughly satisfied as she was, Ginny wanted more. "I could handle a few more days of this."

Catching another loose lock of her hair, he twirled it around his finger. While his chocolatey gaze was warm with affection, she sensed an unusual tension hidden beneath his soft smile. "Or more than that perhaps?"

It took a moment for his words to sink in. She'd assumed they were on the same page as far as brevity went. A fling. A one-night stand. Who was she to argue if there was an opportunity for something more?

A few more days? Weeks? The idea of long lazy days...and nights without constant company or the threat of capture was delicious.

And daunting.

While she'd acknowledged right from the beginning that there was no point becoming attached to him, it would be difficult to not to lose a piece of herself if she stuck around too long. He wasn't a part of her life or a part of her future. He couldn't be. Soon enough he'd be nothing more than history.

A sharp, unwelcome pain pinched her heart at the thought.

Was she prepared to let that pinch grow into real pain?

Ginny looked up into Coll's eyes and knew the answer. It would



be well worth a dash of heartbreak to bask in that affection.

True, avoidance of her problem was just as bad as running away, but exceptions could be made with such a compelling incentive. Inwardly berating herself, Ginny pushed aside her justifications. Deep down, she knew beyond her own precarious emotions, time was of the essence. If Donell were right, every extension of her visit brought with it another chance to alter history, perhaps for the worst. No, she couldn't throw caution to the wind and stay, no matter how she longed to. Any hopes of even one long, drawn out night of lovemaking slipped away.

They had this night but no more.

"Listen Coll, this has all been amazing. It has."

"Has it been nothing more than that?"

His tone was far more guarded than it had been moments before. A quick glance showed his features carried the same expression. He thought she was dismissing what they shared when in fact, the opposite was true.

It didn't change the fact that she was from another time. Another world.

"This...it's been perfect. Every minute."

"Then stay wi' me."

He took advantage of her silence to kiss her. Perhaps the most persuasive weapon in his arsenal. How she wanted to! Wanted to cuddle against him and push aside reality. But her thoughts had begun to churn and there was no stopping them now. Having this same conversation in a week or so wouldn't make it any easier. In fact, it might only make things worse.

The more she thought about it, the more logic told her she needed to go. This wasn't about her alone. Coll didn't possess her foreknowledge that whatever this was had an expiration date. Unless she wanted to turn this cave into a confessional, staying wouldn't be fair to him.

Best she make a clean break of it.

Before she lost herself to the whirlwind once more...lost her good sense.

She pulled away. "I'm sorry."

"Why no'? A sennight ago that was all ye wanted."

Her lips pursed of their own accord and she couldn't help but roll her eyes. "You know it's not at all the same thing."

He sat up. "Aye, and ye ken I dinnae mean stay here in this cave either. I want ye to stay wi' me, by my side."

The pull to do exactly that was strong. It would be so easy to give in. Ginny grasped at reason. "I'm sorry. I can't."

Coll caught her shift and jerked it out of her hands. "Why no'?"

Repetition didn't make the questions any easier to answer.  
"Because...because reasons!"

One sardonic brow rose. "Reasons?"

So, so many. Were there any he could understand? It's a future thing, you wouldn't understand? That she had a home she needed to return to? Happily? Eagerly?

That would be a lie.

Truth was, she had little to go home to.

Staying, though...

She leapt to her feet and began gathering her clothes before she threw caution to the wind.

"Is it yer family? I can go wi' ye to see them first," he persisted.  
"Speak wi' yer fath—"

Dropping to her knees beside him, Ginny cut him off with a kiss. His fingers dove into her hair, holding her in place while his mouth plundered hers. A terrible pang seized her breath and scored her heart. With a groan, she pushed him away. She squeezed his hands so hard her nails bit into his skin before she tore herself away. If she didn't leave now...

"I will never forget this."

Or him.

## Chapter 26

*Present Day*

“Ginny! Ginny? We’re no’ done! Ginn—”

Her name dissolved under a blinding white light and Ginny bit her lip, ignoring the regret and the urge to go back immediately. This sunny spring day she’d run to with gulls calling over the water and waves splashing against the shore could never be as moving as the deepest dark of night almost three hundred years in the past. She paused to tug on one boot and then the other. She’d barely been able to stand the few seconds it had taken to dress in her shift and skirt before she’d fled the cave and left Coll behind.

She wavered indecisively. Yes, running off like that had been straight up rude. She should have stayed and tried to make him understand the futility of an extended affair. What could she have said, though? How could she have explained it...any of it...without raising more questions than she answered? There was no possible way to make him understand.

And if she’d stayed even another minute... Ginny shook her head to rid herself of the image of Coll lying on those blankets. He’d have said something irresistible in that deep, sexy brogue and her already tremulous resolve would have crumbled.

Damn logic. Damn good sense.

But it wasn’t about her alone. There was the greater scheme of established time.

And there was Coll.

No, it was better that she make a clean break before she hurt him, perhaps more than she already had.

*At least leave him a note to say goodbye, you heartless bitch.*

She swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. Yes, *that* she could do.

Climbing up the embankment via packed dirt stairs that had been chiseled into the incline in her time, she followed the clearly marked path posted with arrows pointing toward Loch Nan Uamh and to the historical site, Prince Charlie’s Cave. The woodland park of 1746 had been thinned out over time. A wide swath of lawn left the white and black edifice of Borrodale House clearly visible. Adjacent to her left sat the grey stone turrets of the Victorian era manor-cum-inn she’d stayed at a week ago.

Or checked out of a half hour ago, depending on one's temporal perspective.

Maybe she should pop into the tavern next to it for some cider and inspiration to find the right words to include in the note—the ones she couldn't express face to face.

"Miss Hughes, I thought ye'd left."

The innkeeper stood at the door of the inn, the same woman who'd pelted her with curious questions about her apparel when she checked in and visibly bit her tongue to stifle a refrain when she'd departed.

Ginny veered in her direction. "Mrs. Reid, I was just coming to see you."

"Did ye forget something?"

"No, ma'am," Ginny assured her. "Actually, I was thinking I'd spend another night if you have a vacancy."

"Of course, dear. No' in the thick of the season yet."

The woman waved her arm and disappeared inside. Ginny followed her into the small lobby that was made visually smaller by walls covered to shoulder height in dark walnut panels and then to the ceiling in burgundy wallpaper flocked with a fauna motif. It was a stark contrast to the simple white plaster walls of Borrodale House. Mrs. Reid passed through another door to her office where Ginny had said her goodbyes not an hour before in this time. The innkeeper sat at her desk as she slipped on her reading glasses and woke her computer, minimizing a window showing cat videos.

"Did I happen to mention there are a number of fine clothing shops in Arisaig I could refer ye to if ye're interested?"

It was the second time she'd made the offer. Either the woman was getting a handsome kickback from her referrals or it was another subtle hint about Ginny's historic garb. Whichever it was, this time it was welcome. Unless she wanted to be gawked at, she needed modern clothing to wear on the bus or train back to Urquhart Castle to retrieve Granny's car. That is, assuming it hadn't been towed after—she did the temporal math in her head—one night of real time in the car park. Wow, was that it?

"That would actually be much appreciated. Also, is there a train station in Arisaig?"

The innkeeper's gaze shifted to Ginny and back to the screen. "Aye, it can take ye to Mallaig or Fort William."

Surely she could get a tour bus out of Fort William up to the castle. She pulled out her phone and began searching.

"Right then." The older woman opened a form and began filling it in. "Same room? And card?"

"Yes, please."

“Room for one?” Mrs. Reid asked without looking away from her monitor.

“Yes,” Ginny answered absently. A moment later, her thumbs slowed and stalled. She looked back at the innkeeper. “What makes you ask that?”

“There was a young man here a few minutes ago asking after ye. Seemed rather put out that I dinnae ken where ye went.”

And she was just mentioning it now? Something like that should lead a conversation, not come as an afterthought. Who could it be? She knew no one in the area except Coll and he wasn’t in exactly in the same time zone any longer. Unless—

Her throat grew thick. “Did he happen to leave his name?”

Mrs. Reid paused her typing and glanced over her shoulder with open concern. “I’m sorry, nay dear.”

“What did he look like?”

“Tall, braw. Like a Hieland ben, aye? Wi’ close shaven hair.”

How the hell had Luke found her here? It made no sense. Ginny fought the urge to run. It wasn’t difficult as her limbs felt like iron weights.

“Are ye well, dear?” Cool hands grasped Ginny’s suddenly damp ones. “Ye look a wee bit peely wally.”

“Fine.” She croaked out and cleared her throat. “I’m fine. Thank you, Mrs. Reid. Do you have a pen and paper? I need to write a note.”

“Of course.”

The older woman rifled through her desk drawers while Ginny sweated out her nerves. She cursed herself for the overblown reaction. Luke wasn’t going to hurt her. He liked to rant and rave. He liked loud and intimidating. It was his whole schtick and he excelled at it. On and off the field. He preferred to gaslight, belittle, and demean. It would take a lot to send him over the edge and into any sort of physicality.

*Like going halfway around the globe to get away from him?*

She rolled her eyes at her inner dialogue. Normally, it provided excellent conversation and good advice. She didn’t need any finger pointing right now. Or logic.

Luke was *unlikely* to get physical. There. She wasn’t afraid for her life. It was her mental well-being that was at stake. Her peace of mind. His stalking was unsettling. Nerve-wracking, in fact.

And worst of all, Ginny had no idea how he managed it.

*That* was what unnerved her to the point she’d couldn’t keep her stomach in check. It was like being haunted, never knowing when the ghost was going to materialize. Except this ghost wasn’t tied to a house. He was tied to her. Followed her. Plagued her.

“Ahem?” She snapped back from her daze to find Mrs. Reid

holding a pen and paper out to her. "Here ye are, dear. Would ye like those directions to the shops, as well?"

Not really. She'd much rather race upstairs and lock herself in her room. She wouldn't be spending the night, however. Not an hour if she had her way.

"Yes, thank you." Ginny took the writing implements and a pair of business cards for boutiques that the innkeeper happened to have handy. "Do you happen to know which direction that man went?"

Mrs. Reid nodded. "Aye, nae more than a few dozen meters to the south. Insisted on waiting for ye even though I'd told him ye checked out already."

Ginny frowned. "He's at the tavern?"

Thank God she hadn't walked straight into him unsuspecting. With the power of time on her side, she could avoid him completely.

Maybe forever.

\* \* \*

*Ping, ping, ping.*

Relentless fucker.

Ginny paid no mind to the incoming texts beyond that single thought. Her thoughts were far adrift from Luke now that she was on a train heading east. In fact, they were far removed from her present situation or her surroundings. She should have been geeking out on this train ride in a first-class cabin aboard the Hogwarts Express. Crossing the iconic Glenfinnan Aqueduct barely registered. The biography she bought in Arisaig detailing Charlie's escape to France sat unopened in her lap.

She didn't even gaze in wonder at the gorgeous views of Loch Shiel as they sped by or the monument there that commemorated Prince Charlie's arrival in Scotland in 1745. Rather she stared blankly at the front page of the newspaper her cabin mate across from her held aloft between them. Nothing more than a blur of words.

All she could see was Coll.

Timing her return to the past to coincide with the prince's departure, she slipped into the cave while Coll helped to load the boat and tucked her note under the flap of his saddlebag where he was sure to find it. She'd returned to the present to catch the early train out of town.

Her written goodbye—full of platitudes, thanking him for a good time, *blah, blah, blah*—couldn't begin to cover the regret that macerated her heart. An impersonal piece of pure bull.

It was difficult to write what she was truly feeling when she couldn't articulate it herself. She wanted more from Coll. More than one night. More of everything. All her years with Luke had never produced a moment so intimate as those she shared with Coll. She

knew him. His heart. All of him.

Ugh, this insane infatuation made her think things she shouldn't, conjured fantasies that weren't real or sustainable. Perfect moments didn't last forever. Sex—however earth-shattering it was—did not automatically render deeper emotion. Normally, common sense would have reminded her of that simple truth. Disconnected heart from body, so to speak. She'd been stupid. Careless.

Days, weeks, or months more would only make it harder. No matter how delicious it sounded, Ginny needed to remember the real lesson of fairy tales. However happily they ended, they were fiction.

Below the surface, reality was rarely what it seemed. It was never perfect.

Luke hadn't been right about much, but he had been on one thing. Doing the leaving rather than being the one who was left was preferable. Better than sitting around waiting for a guy to tire of her and leave her with a broken heart. She'd unconsciously employed the same strategy in leaving Coll behind. An act of prudence and self-preservation.

Burying her face in her hands, she pictured the look on his face when she spouted that *It's been great, babe* nonsense. She had hurt him. Sprinkled that shit around like fairy dust when Coll was the one person in her life right now she most wanted to spare from any pain—God knew he'd experienced enough.

Even if Coll felt the same and there was a chance for something more, it wouldn't...*couldn't* change anything in the big picture. This time, heartbreak wouldn't necessarily come in the form of a man's heartless rejection. It was time itself that would break her heart.

It was an impossible situation. She wished she'd been able to find the words to make Coll understand that however tempting his offer was, it was best for both their sakes that they end it.

Before it ended them.

Ginny shook her head. No, that wasn't right. Not only was it melodramatic, it was utterly absurd. Saying they weren't done or that he wanted her by his side could mean any number of things. More time, more sex, or something else. Yes, she should have clarified the details before she'd left him like that.

On the other hand, Coll was an honest, forthright guy. She wasn't familiar with the breed, and maybe that's why she was having trouble dissecting his meaning. But with the exception of the big, fat, time traveling elephant in the room, everything they shared had seemed so honest. He said what he meant, and she'd never seen any indication that he held anything back. From his own lips, she'd had the assurance that he enjoyed her company, liked her, and desired her.

*I dinnae say what I dinnae mean.*

Yes, if there was anything deeper than that, he would have said so. Big picture, Ginny knew where she stood with a guy like him. She knew she didn't deserve him. He would have gotten bored eventually. She was an intriguing enigma to him, nothing more, she decided. He might look for her, however he had no idea how easily she'd disprove his claim that there was nowhere she could go that he wouldn't find her. Maybe he'd spend a day searching the area and wondering where she had disappeared to. He might even be angry with her.

But infatuations faded. Broken hearts mended. In the end, he'd go home and carry on with his life.

Because that's what people did when affairs ended.

There was comfort knowing that in a day or two, she'd be nothing more than a happy memory.

For him.

For her part, the memory would linger far longer.

Her phone chimed, a more pleasant tone than the trumpets of doom. Not wanting to talk to anyone, she let it go to voicemail then listened to it.

"Hey, sweetie, it's Dad. Just calling to see what you're up to. Brontë says you're in Scotland visiting your grandmother? Why didn't you tell me? I've been worried about you." A pause. "Listen, Luke called. I don't know what's going on between you two..."

"It's called divorce, Dad," she whispered aloud, the quiet words barely audible above the chug of the engine.

"...but I know he loves you, and marriage isn't something you should give up on without a fight."

Ginny snorted in mocking laughter. "Like you didn't do the same after more than thirty-plus years with Mom? Hello, pot."

"Anyway," he went on. "Maybe answer a call now and then? Anyway, call me back and say hi to Violet for me. Miss the old girl."

"Wouldn't have to miss her if you hadn't cheated on Mom and divorced her to mess around with girls half your age, Dad," she drawled sarcastically as she clicked off the phone.

He'd really disappointed everyone with that middle-age crisis maneuver.

Guess they were even.

*Oh, I know for a fact that I've disappointed him at least once.*

Then as now, Luke was at the center of it all.

The day she met him was etched so clearly in her mind. Broke at the end of the semester during her sophomore year of college at Temple University, she'd been eating off her meal plan in the dining commons. Luke walked by her table, all broad shoulders beneath his football practice jersey with his sweatpants hiked up over his bulging calves. He'd had a tray in each hand, mounded with food. The novelty



of the moment, rather than his status as a star athlete, had caught her attention. He sat facing her a few tables away, studied his options for a moment, then with a bracing sigh, dug in. Ginny counted four glasses of milk on the trays, two more of chocolate. A plate of salad and another heaping with the high caloric fodder from the buffet crowded one tray. It was meatloaf day. Another serving of the same and two dessert plates filled the other tray.

He ate and ate. She watched with open amusement. At one point, he'd paused to take a breath and caught her staring. With a shrug and a grin, he'd carried on with his business. When he finished, Luke came by her table and asked for her number.

A classic meet-cute, but there hadn't been any fireworks for Ginny.

Her dad, on the other hand...

When she talked to him a few days later and told him the story of *the* Luke Jorgenson asking her out, you would have thought Luke had asked her dad instead. He'd been over the moon at the idea of his daughter dating Temple's star running back. Ginny essentially accepted the date to make him happy, and while she liked Luke and enjoyed his company, she stayed with Luke for the same reason. A realization that had come far too late.

When Luke was drafted in the first round by the Giants, Mike Hughes was as proud as any papa could be. Even prouder when he could claim him as a son-in-law.

Yes, she'd disappointed her father when she'd left Luke. After a lifetime of being his little girl, his favorite, her status in his eyes slipped.

Well, he'd disappointed her, too, with his willingness to overlook Luke's flaws, dismiss the way he spoke to her. Gaslighted her.

Ginny was done with that. Done with men in her life. And whether or not it stung at the moment, that included Coll.

"Ye think so, lass?" A gravelly and somewhat familiar voice filled the silence of the cabin. "Ye ken, the lad was right. Ye're no' done."

## Chapter 27

The corner of the newspaper flopped down to expose the face of the cabin's other passenger. All logical thought scattered to the wind, Ginny gaped at him. Wool flat cap, impish face, ruddy cheeks. It was definitely him.

"Donell? What are you doing here?" she gasped. "More to the point, how did you know I would be here? Or did you?"

Unlike the last time she saw him, he wasn't brimming with anger and didn't rail at her for the wrong she'd done. As much as she might deserve it this time.

"I did," he confirmed with a nod. "Ye could call it Fate but it really has nothing to do with it."

The train whistle blew and the cabin went dark for a few seconds while they passed through a tunnel. It gave Ginny time enough to collect herself. "What should we call it then?"

"How about an intervention?" He folded the paper and set it aside. "That young lad was right, ye're no' done yet." Before she could reply, he held up a hand. "Before I explain, I feel I maun apologize. I may have been a tad harsh wi' ye before."

She drew back, both brows straining skyward at the understatement. "A tad?"

Pulled off his cap and ran a hand over his balding head before he settled the hat back in place. "There are times when I can be an auld curmudgeon, I'll admit. Pressures of the job such as it is, ye ken? I've quite a lot on my plate right now and attempt to avoid unnecessary paperwork and other hardships when I can."

All the questions she'd wanted to ask her sister congealed in her mind fighting for dominance. "Yes, something about living three lives?"

"Sometimes it feels like I've lived a hundred." He turned his pale gaze to the window, though his expression was so melancholy, Ginny didn't think he was seeing the river that flowed parallel to the tracks. "My time is far removed from this one. The future as it was is nothing ye'll regret no' seeing for yerself."

The future? She would have bet her last dollar Donell was from a time prior to hers by at least a century or more. She'd never seen anyone better suited to an era such as the one she'd just left. She could easily picture him spending his days in an old timey pub with a glass of whisky in hand.

Never would she have guessed he was the product of a future time. Envisioning it was impossible, even knowing the time travel device demanded a more technologically advanced civilization. What was the alternative? That he'd stolen it as she had?

"I take it we're not talking about the polar ice caps melting here?"

He turned back to her, the sadness fading from his gaze. "Let us say it is nae utopia. Point of fact, 'tis more dystopian than the most prophetic science fiction novels depict. Climate change is the least of our problems."

Ginny had discovered some pretty grim worlds between the pages of a book, so that was saying something.

"The Scots are nae strangers to tyranny. What ye've seen here isnae the first instance, nor will it be the last. While the world evolves, the essence of oppression degenerates. Ye've seen a hint of what the future holds," he continued. "It is there in the death of compassion, the regression of society. The divisiveness, intolerance, and prejudice. The lack of charity and compassion. All of it. It only gets worse. Power will be held by those who sow hate, who will propagate the worst genocide in history."

Donell sure did know how to kill the hope that things would get better someday.

"Nay, there is hope still," he said as if she'd spoken aloud. "Aye, I've seen a better version of the future world. I thought I fixed it once. I dinnae realize that cutting off the head of the snake would only allow more to grow in its place and make things worse."

He didn't paint hope with a colorful brush. "Wow. Hail Hydra."

"In essence, aye. I'm no' fighting one man any longer. My invention was taken and operatives were placed throughout time to advance their agenda. Now I fight an ideology nurtured across eras. I've worked tirelessly through time against them to build a better future. Living its history and making the changes necessary to achieve it. I've sacrificed everything for it...as young MacLeod has sacrificed for a way of life he believes in, aye?"

Ginny's heart clenched at the mention of Coll. The same idealistic spirit that had driven Coll to sacrifice his father's love and devote his life to the Jacobite cause was reflected in Donell's pale blue eyes. Whatever his objective was, he believed in it wholeheartedly.

"So you're trying to rebuild the future with peace and love?" she asked then winced when she realized how trite she sounded. "I didn't mean that like it sounded. What I mean is, what can one man do to change the future?"

Donell sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ye're far less mercenary than yer sister. She assumed one could simply go back in time and assure that despots are never born."

She shook her head. "Rewriting history so that Hitler was never born wouldn't have killed the Nazi movement. It would have only delayed it. It's an ideology, not a person."

"Clever lass." He nodded in approval. "Aye, I tried it that way. It dinnae work. Evil is too easily replaced. What is needed isnae a new leader. 'Tis a new philosophy. An element of humanity powerful enough to offset the discord. Ye're correct, one man cannae beget such change. I need an army. People wi' strong minds, good hearts, and the inclination to right wrongs. I find them and place them where they are needed most to vanquish that same sort of doctrine before it has a chance to take root. *When* they are needed most, aye?"

"Like Tris and my sister?" Donell inclined his head at her conclusion. Ginny's head rocked side to side as she considered it. "I can see it. Brontë loves a good cause."

"Aye, the ladies in yer family have a strong sense of justice and a willingness to fight for it."

Ginny hoped she was included in the compliment. She recalled how he'd spoken so fondly of her grandmother's participation in the women's rights protests in the seventies. Not many men, especially at the time, would have cheered the movement on.

"I've spent decades dedicated to this task. 'Tis been an uphill battle," he continued, suddenly weary. Looking older than before. "Listen to me go on and on. Ye've a patient ear, lass. I can see why young MacLeod's taken a liking to ye. Och, one of these days, I'd like to accomplish my mission and retire while I still have a bit of life in me, aye?"

Was her grandmother the beneficiary of that bit of life? One of the three lives he was leading simultaneously? She wanted to ask what his intentions were, but at the moment she was more interested in this mission of his. "The mission of righting wrongs and manipulating people through time."

The old codger removed his cap and scratched his head again with a frown that creased his face into deep folds. "Why is it ye all use that word? Manipulating?"

Ginny shrugged. "Call it what it is."

His lips flattened. "Ended well enough for most of them, I'd say."

Except her. But then she wasn't part of his master plan. She was a mistake.

Then it hit her. "Hugh Urquhart is one of those people, isn't he? I knew it!"

"Clever and insightful." Approval lit his eyes again. Ugh, she was such a sucker for affirmation. She should really find a professional to help her overcome these issues before they got her in more trouble.

She recalled the way Hugh had run across the moor only to trip

into that vortex. It was nothing like her passage through time. “He didn’t look like he knew it was coming. I take it you didn’t give him the same option to participate as you did Brontë?”

“Recruitment isnae my strong suit.” Given the shock and horror on Hugh’s face, that was something of an understatement. “In past years, I found it more expedient to act rather than take the time to explain the matter. These days, I’ll admit my patience runs even thinner. A clear mission makes matters more direct. Either way, as I said, I kent all would be well in the end. Hugh Urquhart is a good man with a level head and good sense. Something the world desperately needs these days.”

While his methodology was pretty damn flawed, she couldn’t argue that point. “Wait. *These* days? He’s here in this time?”

“He is.” He gestured to the phone in her hand. “Ye should—what is it, ye call it?—Google him. Doing well for himself, he is.”

Ginny did a quick search. Hugh popped up immediately, though not as she expected. His name came up on the list on The Sunday Times Booksellers List. The top ten, in fact. Author of the acclaimed book, *Conversations Among Men*, a fictional round table debate on religion, science, and the disparity of the two between historical figures like Voltaire, Hume, Frederick the Great and other renowned philosophers. Ginny was surprised she hadn’t heard of it yet. It sounded intriguing.

More so now that she knew a bit of his background.

“Not a fictional account, I take it?” Ginny saved it to her TBR list and glanced up at Donell. “Have you read it?”

“Do I seem such a philistine to ye to make ye think I hivnae?”

He seemed like a lot of things. Philosopher, idealist, activist—all rolled up in the most contrary package she could imagine. A cantankerous old Scotsman wasn’t exactly a poster child for a progressive movement. She’d love to hear every single story of where he’d been and how he decided who best fit the role he wanted them to play in the future. Moreover, she couldn’t help but admire his commitment to his principles. Coll’s passion for his cause was one of the things she most admired about him.

Hopefully, Donell’s cause wasn’t as futile as Coll’s. The world could use more than a few people to make it a better place. Whether they learned from the past or changed it.

Ginny’s thoughts slowed and rewound. Suspicion curdled her appreciation for the old man. “Wait a minute, I thought you said you couldn’t change the past.” He stared intently out the window as if he couldn’t hear her. Scooting to the edge of her seat, she leaned toward him so he couldn’t ignore her. “What is done can’t be undone. Isn’t that what you said?”

If possible, his ruddy cheeks grew redder. As did the tips of his ears. "A wee white lie. Nothing more."

Disbelief left her gawking at him. "I could have gone back to the moment I first time traveled to Culloden and stopped myself from going at all. Is that what you're saying? Why would you lie about that?"

"I was curious to see what ye would do," he admitted, not looking at all remorseful for the trials and heartache his *wee white lie* had led to.

"To fix my mistake? That's what you said it was, right? I should never have been there."

He shrugged. "I've always found that mistakes often happen for a reason." When she wasn't appeased by his answer, he continued. "Come now, lass, dinnae tell me ye wouldnae have gone back wi' all ye ken now?"

Despite her heartache and regret, she wouldn't have missed a minute of it. Not that she would admit as much to him. No wonder Brontë seemed ambivalent about the old codger.

"You don't get to answer my question with a question," she said. "Could I go back and undo it? Even after the mess I've made?"

"Would ye want to?"

Impossible.

"You see this right here, Donell?" She circled a finger in the space between them. "This would be why people use the word manipulation in regards to you."

As if he wasn't aware of the emotion flooding her—he probably knew her exact blood pressure, damn him—Donell checked his pocket watch then tucked it away as if he hadn't a care in the world. "We should be arriving in Fort William soon. Mayhap we should get back to the topic at hand."

Though she'd rather kick him to the wayside for toying with her as he had, Ginny couldn't completely subdue her curiosity. "You mean your comment about me not being done yet? I assure you I am."

His brows rose in obvious doubt. "Ye're willing to condemn that lad to an early grave, then?"

## Chapter 28

Ginny departed the train and ran up the platform to catch up with Donell. Hiking boots were not running shoes, and he was way faster than she would have thought. Steam bellowed from the engine. She almost lost sight of the old man in the fog. She darted through the crowd, bumping into the other passengers or hitting them with her overstuffed bag. The train whistle blew again nearly popping her eardrum. Her ears rang and she swore she could almost hear Coll calling her name.

Once again, regret shot through her.

Catching up with Donell, she waved her book pointedly in his face. "What are you talking about? I haven't finished it yet, but spoiler, the hero escapes unharmed."

He brushed the book aside and kept walking with a shrug. "Cannae say the same of his entourage."

"Aha, but Coll isn't a part of his entourage!"

He cast her a pitiful look from the corner of his eye. "Wisnae."

"What?"

"He *wisnae* part of it, until he was once more," he said without adding an ounce of clarity. They passed through the depot and out again to the station's car park. He stopped by a flashy metallic copper Bentley that in no way suited his persona and opened the passenger door. "Get in, ye can read while I drive. Skip to the end. Page 212."

Reluctantly, she complied. No offense to Coll's lap, but the buttery leather seat was the softest thing she'd sat on in weeks. Suffused by the luxury of it, her ire slipped away. As Donell suggested, she flipped to the end of the biography and found the revelation he referenced. After allowing herself a moment to absorb her grief, she brought out her phone for a Google search to verify it.

"Ye see?"

Yes, she did. In big bold Helvetica. Ginny didn't recognize most of the names of the men who colluded in Prince Charlie's escape. Of those she did, John O'Sullivan reached France with the prince unscathed, Father MacDonald surrendered to the English and eventually died in prison, MacEachine and Aeneas MacDonald were banished from the United Kingdom for the remainder of their lives. Edmund Burke and Cailin MacLeod....

She closed her eyes but the inverse of the black and white print was emblazoned behind her lids. The two men perished in the effort

to see the prince to freedom.

"How?" she rasped out. "Coll didn't even go with the prince. He went back to Dunchleach."

"Did he?" Donell countered enigmatically, steering the car north out of Fort William.

Honestly, she had no evidence of what Coll had done other than it was what he'd said he'd do. More Googling would probably be easier than dragging answers out of the old man. A few minutes of internet searches amid wide gaps of coverage didn't provide anything more conclusive.

Ginny gave up and tucked the phone in her pocket. "I don't understand. What happened?"

"I told ye the smallest thing could upset the balance of history."

Donell had given her no choice but to stay to fix her first mistake that led to Prince Charlie's capture. Should she have left the moment the boat departed? Had a few hours more selfishly taken led to Coll's death? To Burke's?

"You're saying I did this?"

"Ye ken, ye're far less temperamental than yer sister," he said conversationally, as if the answer were unimportant. Or moot. "And ye swear far less. At this point, she was raining curses down upon me."

"Foul language is frowned upon when you work with impressionable young adults," she grumbled. "I'd lose my job if I said what was on my mind half the time. Don't tempt me, though. I'm happy to let a few fly if you don't tell me what happened to Coll and Mr. Burke."

"Young MacLeod rejoined the prince's party shortly before Prince Charlie's final departure from the Hebrides," he told her. "Ye ken the tale of Flora MacDonald?"

"Some."

If a children's book could be counted as a definitive history on the subject, that is. Her granny had kept a supply of picture books on hand when Ginny and her sisters were younger to occupy them during their frequent visits.

One of those books related the folklore behind the story of the beautiful Flora MacDonald who helped Prince Charlie travel undetected from the Outer Hebrides to the Isle of Skye by disguising him as her Irish maid, Betty Burke.

Burke.... She drew in a shaky breath. How had the sweet man ended up being killed? She'd never heard or read of it before. Had something she'd done pulled the strings of fate hard enough to tweak history if not change it completely? She couldn't bear to think she had a hand in it.



Ginny worried her lower lip and stared past Donell out the window. Through gaps in the trees, flashes of water appeared. Loch Ness. This road was close to the one she'd traveled by with Coll not so long ago. Proof that it didn't take much time for crazy things to happen. A few months from now, Coll could have forgotten all about her. As heartrending as that discovery would be, it was still preferable to Donell's dire alternative.

"What does Coll have to do with Flora MacDonald?"

"That is for ye to find out," was all he said. "I can tell ye the trouble coincides with their journey from Benbecula to Skye. The rest is up to ye."

"That's no help at all!" Especially when he likely knew all the fine details down to the weather conditions of that day. She paged back in her biography until she found what she was looking for. "It says here that they don't make that trip until June. That's two months away."

"Actually, it's about three hours or so," he corrected as he swerved around a truck crowding the narrow road and checked his pocket watch at the same time.

"From here? You want me to go back and put myself in danger? *Again?*" she stressed the last word. Take the chance of messing up history even more? "Like right now?"

"Aye. Well, ye'll have to catch the morning ferry from Uig. Nae chance ye'll make the last one tonight."

Ginny bit down on the inside of her cheek and stared out the window. All her worries and fears floated to the surface. "Has it occurred to you he might not want my help? After the way I left things back there, he could very well tell me to fuck off and who would blame him?"

"I ken ye'll do whatever is needed to save him." He looked at her too long, considering the winding road they were on. "Ye can do this, lass."

Sure. If she read a dozen books on the subject and memorized every misstep the prince made along with every move the English countered with. That wasn't the hard part. The risk wasn't in aiding a group of historically significant man. The true peril was her own. The danger of having her lovely fantasies turn to reality.

"And what's wrong wi' that?" Donell asked as if she'd spoken aloud.

Nothing. Everything, if there was nothing she could do about it. She didn't know if she was strong enough to leave Coll for a third time. "I can't do it."

"Aye, ye can. Nae time like the present."

"You're hilarious," she scoffed. "Well, presently, I need to take Granny's car back to her and figure out some way to explain where I

disappeared to.”

There was also Luke to deal with. Plus, she needed time to get her head in the game and push her heart out of the situation with Coll. It would be hard enough facing him again after the horrible way she’d left him.

“Dinnae worry about Violet,” Donell told her. “I will drive her car back and have already provided reason for yer absence. Ye need no’ worry about that.”

No, now she only had to worry about what he’d said. Right now, she didn’t want to know. She had enough to think about. As she could see it, there were three options.

First, do as Donell suggested and catch up with Coll and Burke in the Outer Hebrides before the worst happened. This would require time to do some research and formulate a proper plan. If she were going to go back again, she would do everything right and get the job done without another misstep. She’d go fully armed into the fray, rescue the prince, and save Coll and Burke. All she had to do was find this Flora MacDonald before Coll got there.

Flora MacDonald and Coll. Pairing the names together—the handsome Highlander and reputedly bodacious woman—turned her stomach. After two long months, she may very well walk into a budding romance between them.

Oh please, please, don’t let a wayward romance be the problem. The last thing she wanted to do was show up like a jealous ex and try to keep them apart. Ugh, she so didn’t want to be Luke in any way, shape or form!

Not an attractive option.

Option two: The alternative was to backtrack to Arisaig and pick up where they left off. Make it seem like she’d never left at all. She could take Coll up on his offer. If he still wanted her, she would stick to him even more tenaciously than Luke did to her and pray she came out of it whole. Without losing a part of herself to Coll she might never get back.

Or worse, finding out that he wasn’t really as kind or caring as she imagined. Not as smart and funny. Or discovering that the overwhelming attraction that left her burning for him fizzled into nothing.

Worse than that, if Coll were to determine the same about her.

Love disappointed. Reality never lived up to the hype.

Wading through such a devastating pool of disillusionment again might be more than Ginny could handle. She imagined how it would all play out—every scenario, every conversation—left a boulder the size of Ben Nevis dragging down the pit of her stomach.

It was a defective plan to say the least, lacking detail and filled

with ambiguities. How would she keep Coll away from the prince and save Mr. Burke at the same time? She could make two separate trips. Spend two months with Coll until the danger to him passed, then see to Burke. A long, drawn out process. While doable, the plan was high in potential conflict, particularly that of the personal sort.

Option three was the easiest to execute. She could simply travel back to the hours before they began to load the boat and leave that message in the sand to tell herself to get in the boat with Prince Charlie after all. Or intercept herself and tell herself she needed to go and somehow convince Coll to join them.

Ginny flipped through the pages of her book again to reacquaint herself with the fine details she'd only skimmed past before. Yes, there it was. Under the deadly conditions asea, Old MacLeod changed his mind about Skye and insisted they land there. Contrarily Prince Charlie then decided it was the Hebrides or bust.

Reading the account of their crossing, she rejected the plan. Not only because of the risk of an inexplicable twin sighting that would be impossible to explain.

She'd imagined many times how Death would come for her. Hanging over the side of a boat alongside the infamous Bonny Prince Charlie while they bobbed and weaved their way through a magnificent storm, emptying the contents her stomach all the while, was not on the list. She could picture it. Lighting, thunder, and gale-force winds that buffeted the boat from side to side while the waves provided the ups and downs of a rollercoaster hell, and old man MacLeod yelled *I told you so* all the while.

Sure, in the end, they made it out of the storm as the sun came up with everyone crediting old MacLeod's mad skills at seamanship with keeping them from crashing against Skye's rocky shores. They made it to the Isle of Benbecula without further incident. While she could picture Prince Charlie leading the sailors singing old Scottish ditties while he took a turn bailing water, she had no desire to join him. Who knew, another person or two overloading the boat might spell death for them all.

Besides, there were still those long months between that trip across the Minch and the one that would finally carry Prince Charlie to the Isle of Skye.

She skimmed through the next few pages. Cumberland took Fort Augustus and Loudoun before arriving in Arisaig. He was hot on their heels. English cruisers patrolled the Minch.

Days extended into weeks. Prince Charlie and his men would stay for a few days in one place then sail to another island for a few more. From South Uist to North, up to the Isle of Lewis, back again to Benbecula. From this island to that. Some populated and some

completely deserted.

When they tried to purchase a boat on the Isle of Harris, the locals blocked him from their harbor town out of fear of what their assistance might mean for them if the redcoats came looking.

Weeks turned to months with more of the same. Run, hide. Almost get caught by militiamen again and again. One close call after another. Cat and mouse. Run for dear life again. Walk from one end of an island to the other. Freeze in the rain and suffer in the heat as spring turned to summer. Starve, eat. Sometimes the locals would provide them food, but again largely they stayed away not wanting to incur the wrath of the redcoats should their assistance be discovered.

Somehow, through it all, no one betrayed Prince Charlie's location. It seemed everyone knew where he was, too. Local clan chieftains came to meet with the prince, some urging him to stay and fight while others advised him to flee. As she'd promised him, not even for the thirty-thousand-pound reward that had been put on his head had any of them given him up. It was a miracle.

Ginny didn't want any part of that trip, especially if Coll decided not to make it with her only to circle around later in time to risk his life.

Scratch option three off the list. That left two.

"Och, ye are an overthinker, aren't ye?" Donell grumbled as she ran through the possibilities and backlash. "Young MacLeod would go wi' if ye asked him."

He might. That longing she'd seen on his face when he talked about his home and family had spoken volumes, though. Donell could bait her all he like. She knew Coll wanted to return to Dunchleach and see them again more than anything in the world.

"I could never do that. It would be cruel to somehow oblige him to further delay something that is so important to him."

Even if it ended up that his father didn't welcome him with open arms, Coll deserved the chance to find out. Given what Donell said, it made sense that he went to Dunchleach. It was a short journey from there over the Minch to where Prince Charlie hid out in the Hebrides.

"And it has nothing to do wi' the fact that getting on that boat would erase from time what came after it left?"

There was nothing lewd in the old man's tone, no laughter in his eyes. Even so, Ginny couldn't stop the fire that rose to her cheeks. If she did that, the magic she'd share with Coll would be expunged from history. A lump formed in her throat at the thought.

"There is a fourth option," he told her. "Ye could go back to the start and stop yerself from travelling back in time to begin with. Prince Charlie's escape to France would proceed as history originally recorded without anyone wiser for it."

“Is that even possible? You haven’t actually answered that question yet.”

“What if it were?”

Ginny rolled her eyes skyward. “Still not an answer.”

Even without one, she weighed his retort in her mind. What if it were? The same conundrum as leaving on the boat would exist. Her time with Coll in the cave would be undone. Worse, it would all be undone. The good with the bad. Their conversations, confidences. Waking up in his arms. That feeling that had stolen over her when he’d said he was proud of her. Learning that kind, considerate men did exist in the world. Those were moments she wanted to cherish—not undo.

She wanted to remember it forever. All of it.

Even the heartbreak that came from leaving behind something she cared about.

“What if ye could undo what was done and retain the remember of it all?”

Ginny side-eyed him, not liking this feeling that he somehow knew what she was thinking. “How would that even work?”

“Ye couldnae return to tell yerself no’ to go if ye never went in the first place.”

Yes, the grandfather paradox. Turned on its end, in her opinion. “That’s some circular logic.”

He shrugged but offered no further explanation.

“Coll and Burke would be fine?”

“Aye.”

Her mind worked through it until she came to an unpleasant conclusion.

“And he would have no memory of me at all.”

“Nay. None.”

## Chapter 29

Go back and save Coll.

Go back and undo it all.

Ugh, she just couldn't turn it off, could she. She couldn't stop thinking about it, turning it over in her mind. Replaying it. Imagining it never happened at all. For them, at least. It was the simplest, most logical move.

But should she do it? Could she? She'd made such a mess of things already.

Donell refused to weigh in on the matter. Within minutes of their arrival at Urquhart Castle, she found herself behind the wheel of Donell's sleek, sexy beast of a car with the backpack she'd left at Granny's in the backseat. He'd again nixed her argument about Granny's car by insisting he'd return it himself and left her to her own devices.

Surely that was some sort of sign that he wanted her to proceed with the initial plan to go back and save Coll and Burke without undoing what was already done. Unless, as before, he was simply curious to see what she would do. She should have pushed harder for answers.

Ginny stared out the windshield at the ruin of Urquhart Castle nestled on the shore of the loch. What would Hugh Urquhart do? Had he ever been presented with options like this? She banged her head back against the padded headrest. What she wouldn't give for five minutes of peace in her mind.

She had no idea what the best option was. She needed time to think. And wasn't time relative these days? She could bend it to her will as Donell did. Take all the time she needed—days, weeks—and still arrive in time to save the day.

*"Why do you build me up, Buttercup, just to let me down? Mess me around?"* Ginny quickly accepted the incoming call for no other reason than to stop those infernal questions from sticking her in mind more thoroughly than her own nonlyrical thoughts were.

"Brontë."

"I can't believe he left you there!" The accusation blared through the speaker.

Ginny held the phone away from her ear and lowered the volume. "What?"

"Donell!" her sister growled. "I mean, he's done some

questionable stuff but to abandon you in the past by yourself like that is unconscionable.”

“To be fair, I messed it up without help from anyone else. It made sense that I should fix it.”

“Don’t try to defend him! He left you to fend for yourself in a dangerous period of time. You could have been killed.”

Yet, she’d felt alive for the first time in forever, thanks in part to Donell.

Ugh, was she actually defending the old man? “Look at it this way, I’m no longer a mere lover of history, I *am* history. It’s sort of transcendent, really, when you think about it. Besides, it wasn’t all bad. Parts of it were kind of nice.”

There was a heartbeat of silence.

“You met someone.”

Her cheeks burned. Ginny was glad her sister couldn’t see her or she’d know the answer to that question straight away. “Why would you say that? I mean, yes, I met several people including Bonnie Prince Charlie.”

“Really?” That took the wind out of Brontë’s sails. “Oh, that’s so cool. I haven’t met anyone so historically famous yet. Was he a real prick? Or a fop like they portray him on TV?”

A welcome laugh bubbled up. “At times. Mostly he was way different than I imagined.” Her thoughts made a mammoth leap forward. Why hadn’t she thought of it before? The answers were right there if she’d known where to look. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“If you could go back...” She left the thought dangling. Of course, Brontë wouldn’t undo her time in the past. Her sister had saved lives, not put them at risk. She’d found love, not heartache. She was happier than Ginny had ever seen her.

As for herself, Ginny didn’t know if she was brave enough to see if the same might happen to her. Even if it did, that didn’t guarantee a happy ending. Tris had acclimated well enough from the early twentieth century to the twenty-first. A hundred years didn’t require a monumental stretch of the imagination. Coll had almost two more centuries on him. Assuming she could bounce Coll forward almost three hundred years without a hitch was something else.

Hugh Urquhart managed it. Then again, he hadn’t had a choice.

More than likely, she didn’t either. If she were meant to be a permanent part of Donell’s project, he would have said something.

“Never mind.”

“What? What is it?” Brontë pressed. “You did meet someone, didn’t you? Please tell me it wasn’t Prince Charlie.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Tell me about him!” She could almost picture her sister bouncing on the bed in excitement. “Is he tall, dark, and amazing?”

“Are all perfect men Tris to you?”

Brontë reinterpreted her teasing remark. “So he’s perfect then, is he?”

“Pretty much,” the admission was out before she could stop herself.

Coll wasn’t a paragon. But her sister wasn’t far off the mark. He was imperfectly perfect.

“Oh my God, you’re in love! This is wonderful!”

“No, it isn’t wonderful. And I don’t—” She let out a long calming breath. “Thing is, I’ve put his life at risk. Oh, Brontë, I’ve screwed everything up! I don’t know what to do. Donell says I can go back and undo it all. Stop myself before I can ever go back and make a mess of things. Maybe I should.”

“What? No!” her sister shrieked. “A: I wouldn’t believe half of the things Donell tells you. It’s probably a test of some sort, anyway. B: If you don’t go, you’ll never meet this guy and you won’t have the chance to... hang on.” There was some muffled conversation on the end of the line before her sister spoke again. “Hang on, Tris wants to talk to you.”

Before Ginny could protest, he was on the line. “Ms. Hughes... Ginny,” his smooth brogue wasn’t as thick as Coll’s. It soothed, nonetheless. She felt herself relax before he even said another word. “I understand ye’ve something of a dilemma? I’d like ye to think before ye do anything rash. I want ye to ken, yer sister once went back and tried to subvert our relationship. To make it so we never met, at least in my memory, aye? Dinnae do it, lass. Whoever this chap is, I promise ye, he willnae thank ye for it.”

Ginny winced. Subvert was a much harsher word than undo. It stung. “I appreciate the advice, however my situation isn’t the same as yours. Coll isn’t in love with me or anything.”

“How will ye ever ken that if ye dinnae gi’ him a chance to find out for himself?” he argued. “For myself, I wouldnae want to surrender even a minute of the time I shared wi’ yer sister. No’ even those initial moments before she grew in my heart.”

That heartfelt avowal sent a pang of yearning through her chest.

“I don’t want him to get hurt,” it came out as a whisper, filled with regret and the fear that she’d already done exactly that.

“As I told Brontë, whether it was an eternity or an hour more, I wouldnae sacrifice a minute of it over the risk of heartbreak,” he told her. “Yer young man deserves to keep the memories ye gave him and the moments ye shared. Ask yerself if ye’re willing to shed these memories, note the reaction in yer heart. If it isnae a palatable option



for ye, ye shouldnae preemptively make that decision on another's behalf."

"Even if it costs him his life?"

She could almost hear his shrug. "Nothing's guaranteed in life when ye have time on yer side. Quite frankly, in my opinion, this isnae yer choice to make nae matter what auld Donell has to say on the matter. It is yer gentleman's." He paused but she couldn't find the words to respond. "I will return ye to yer sister now. Best of luck, Ginny."

Logical arguments were the worst. It was so difficult to brush them off. Especially when they were made by a man who'd once stood in Coll's figurative shoes. Tris was right, she couldn't negate Coll's part in this. At least not without his consent. She'd let him make that choice.

No undoing then. No subverting. She could either go back to Arisaig, pick up where she left off and go from there, or skip ahead to the end.

"Isn't he swoon worthy?" Brontë gushed once she was back on the line. "This is so incredible. First me, then Aila, and now you. Time travel has been such a gift for us all when it comes to finding the perfect man. How awesome is that?"

"Is it?" Ginny rested her head back more gently this time and let out a sigh. She didn't know who Aila was, but awesome could have divergent meanings in her case. As in wonderful and terrible, when it came to consequences, at any rate. "I don't know what to do. Donell is no help at all."

"Listen, Gin. Donell's motives may be completely counterintuitive to what is best for you," her sister consoled. "You do you. I know what you're going through is difficult. There are no easy answers. I'm here for you if you want to talk."

"Thanks." Ginny's chest clenched. They hadn't been close in a few years. It was nice to feel that sisterly love blossom again. "I really don't know what to do. Everything I do seems to make matters worse, and it's not like anything can come from it, right? We're from different worlds."

"When did that ever stop anyone?"

She traced a circle around the steering wheel with the palm of her hand and back again. "Even if you take the obvious roadblocks out of the equation...." she sighed. "I don't know. After all the shit I've been through, I don't have tons of optimism."

At last, the honest truth.

"Only a trip through the shit can help you appreciate the smell of roses," was Brontë's philosophical rebuttal. "When you get here, we can talk about it. I'll help you figure it out as best I can."

“I’d love that, but...” Ugh, as much as she would actually love talking through the problem, Ginny didn’t want to be at Granny’s when her ex returned. She had enough to deal with without wading through the proverbial shit storm that was Luke Jorgenson again. “I’ve got a couple more things to take care of first.”

There was another pause, this one weightier than the last. “Donell said you’d say that.”

“Really? What else did he say?”

Knowing what he said would certainly be beneficial to her decision-making process. Although he refused to help her choose among her three viable options, he’d originally told her to go to Uig on the Isle of Skye to catch the ferry to the Outer Hebrides. Because that was the best option? Or because once again, he was curious to see how she “handled it.” He’d probably witnessed multiple variations of what had become her reality. Sat there with a bag of popcorn watching her make a mess of her life as if it were on a time loop.

While Donell’s vision for a better future for all gave her the warm fuzzies, the scope of his power over her everyday life left Ginny unsettled. Mulling it over, she almost missed what her sister was saying.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Brontë said. “Unfortunately, he didn’t offer anything that would be useful to you.” Her tone turned cautious. “I actually called to find out where you were going and to warn you. Luke went to Arisaig looking for you.”

“Yes, I heard.” The urge to bang her head on the seat with more enthusiasm this time gripped her. “How does he do it? He always knows where I am.”

“Oh Gin. I’m sorry. I should have said something right from the—”

“Ginny!”

Ginny shrieked and dropped her phone as someone tried the car handle and pounded on the passenger side window. Where, to an ignorant American, the driver of the car would be. And an ignorant American did stand there, cupping his hands around his eyes to peer through the dark, tinted windows.

“I know you’re in there, Ginny!” Luke shouted as if a window were a sound barrier too. “This is the only car left in the lot, so I know it’s you. Get out and talk to me.”

She ground her teeth and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. It would be so easy to drive away. There would be no way he could stop her. Better yet, run him over and rid herself of the problem permanently. Even as she wondered if Scotland had an extradition treaty with the U.S., Ginny discarded the notion. She would leave being an asshole to him.

Besides, as much as she didn’t need this confrontation right now,

she needed to know how he managed to run her to ground everywhere she went. Hitting the button, she rolled down the window a few inches.

“What an unpleasant surprise. What are you doing here, Luke?”

“Very funny. Unlock the door.” He pulled on the handle with a pointed glare.

She shook her head. “Answer my question.”

He released the handle and spun around, throwing his hands in the air before he leaned over again to peer through the crack. “Because this is the only way I can talk to you. You’ve been ghosting me. Even at the train station back there, I called your name and you pretended to ignore me. Then you go off with some old man?”

She wasn’t even going to address that insinuation.

“So you fly thousands of miles for a face to face?” It was difficult to keep her tone even. She had no desire for another shouting match. “We aren’t married anymore, Luke. I’m not obligated to respond to your calls and texts. Especially when there is nothing more to say.”

Luke smacked the roof of the car and spun around again. “Fuck that, there’s plenty to say. How many times do I have to tell you I’m sorry? Those girls meant nothing.”

Ginny tilted her head back, looking up through the sunroof to the cloudy sky above. The world was gray. Perhaps it was because of the tinting. Perhaps it was Luke himself who stole the sunshine from her life. She was so tired of it all.

“It’s not about being sorry.” It wasn’t about his cheating, either. How many times did she have to tell him that before he believed it? “It’s about happiness, joy...Love. It’s about liking who I am.”

He made a face, one she’d seen many times before when she tried to explain what was missing in her life and what was wrong in their relationship. It ridiculed and derided.

“You got to lay off the Ted Talks, girl. All that empowerment shit. ‘Do what makes you feels good’ and ‘Only you can define who you are’”—he put air quotes around the maxims—“that’s what ruined us.”

“No, it’s not.”

She could start from square one. It wasn’t her lagging self-worth that had driven them apart. It was his narcissism. His taking away from her the power to be the person she wanted to be. He’d stolen her confidence by belittling her intelligence and capabilities. He’d made her doubt herself by comparing her to every other woman he knew. Conditioned her to make those comparisons on her own until she was never thin enough, sophisticated enough, or worthy enough even in her own eyes. He’d taken away the person she was proud to be and left her the hot mess that she was.

Was it any wonder she didn’t have a clue about what to do next?

Luke had her so tangled in knots, she couldn't even imagine a world where a man like Coll might want her.

Oh, Coll....

Ginny may not have known him for long, but instinctively she knew he would never do that to her. Coll, the product of a patriarchal society, treated women better than a man raised in what should have been the most equitable era in history. While she may not be able to be with Coll, then someday she wanted to find someone exactly like him.

She liked herself better without Luke. Even if that meant waiting decades for a better man or living on her own, she'd never go back to him. Or be with anyone like him.

She was worth more than that.

In that moment, Ginny realized that was part of what she liked about Coll. Not his approval, but the subtle way he'd shown her that there was only one person's approval she needed. Her own. He'd revealed the part of her she'd thought she'd lost. Through his eyes, she'd seen the person she used to be. He'd made it possible for her to find herself. To like herself again.

It was a gift. He deserved to be thanked properly for giving it back to her.

Not so much the man who'd taken it from her in the first place.

"I won't get drawn into this argument again," she told Luke. "Blame it on me all you want. Make me out to be the bad guy on social media"—he already had. "Tell people whatever you want, it won't change anything. We're done. Please let it go."

Let me be.

"I can't do that. I love you, baby."

Ginny buried her face in her hands. Always an afterthought in their arguments. Love was never at the top of the list, not even when he cheated on her. Then it was justification instead of love. No, this wasn't love. Love didn't leave one person withering on the vine while the other blossomed.

Luke must have thought she covered her face for other reasons, to hide her sorrow maybe. He tugged the door handle again, more gingerly this time. "C'mon, baby. Open the door."

"No." She lifted her head to look him straight in the eye. "Not now. Not ever. The door between us is closed for good. Go home, Luke."

Both hands slapped down on the roof this time and Ginny jumped. "This is bullshit! I treated you right. You got a condo in Manhattan, bitch. You got money and a better car than this fancy-ass one. You got yourself a two-time Pro Bowler, and you're not even grateful."

"Enough," she muttered to herself and started the car.

“Don’t you run off on me again. I’m not done talking.”

She jerked the gearshift into reverse and backed out of the parking spot.

“Maybe not, but I’m done listening.”

## Chapter 30

*Nunton House, Isle of Benbecula, Scotland  
June 27, 1746*

Ginny twisted her hair into a period-appropriate knot at the base of her neck and secured it with her elastic band before the wind could tangle it into knots. The weather in June of 1746 was far more turbulent than late April in her time. Given what she'd read, she'd known prior to this trip back in time that there was a storm brewing. Sure enough, heavy clouds churned in the sky. Violent waves hurled themselves against the beach and licked the hem of her skirt. She waded through the white sand in favor of the long, wavy grass of the moor.

A hundred meters away stood Nunton House. In her time, the two-story, gray stucco building was a hostel. In 1746, it was the home of the Chief of Clanranald. She hadn't been able to determine if it were the same Clanranald she'd met at Borrodale House. What she did know was that Lady Clanranald was currently in residence.

Her last hope in locating Prince Charlie and by extension, Coll and Burke.

She'd spent weeks researching the timeline of the prince's retreat from Culloden back to France. Four books on the subject only to discover that the account varied from one to the next. "Precise" dates noted by the authors turned out to be more of a loose guideline. Everything from April 1746 to his final departure in September was conjecture, taken from secondhand accounts and old letters or journals kept by those who saw the prince along the way. Forget fixed calendars or specific towns. Dates could range by weeks and areas by general region. For example, each recorded Prince Charlie's retreat from Culloden through the highlands to Arisaig far differently from the others. None matched the dates or the mountainous route they'd actually taken.

The only thing they had in common was the infamous folklore about how Flora MacDonald helped Prince Charlie travel to the Isle of Skye and make his final departure. Even those accounts didn't provide an exact location of where she could find them.

Books were her only option out here. The Outer Hebrides had proven to be an utter dead zone for cell coverage. Her phone usage was limited to a notebook app. She didn't mind. Disconnection from

the world at large was welcome right now. She had all the time she needed to complete her search. No one could call her, text her, or—if that was how Luke was finding her—track her location. She even went so far as to stop at an ATM on her way here so she could pay for her housing in cash.

The off season had its perks. The blackhouse cottage she'd rented was built of stacked stone with the bottom half dug into the earth so that only about five feet of wall was above ground before the thatched roofs angled to a peak. She'd chosen it because the structure itself was relatively unchanged since the early eighteenth century and also because its convenient location on the northwest coast of the Isle of South Uist made for the perfect jumping off point to search through varied points in history.

And because, in theory, Prince Charlie had spent almost three weeks skulking around the area a stone's throw away.

In reality, for every night she spent doing research in the present, she'd spent days in the past searching up and down the entire west coast of the Outer Hebrides from North Uist to South with Benbecula in between, stopping at any specific location mentioned in her research without luck. The prince had traveled between them by boat and across country on foot. As hearty as the prince had proven to be, the amount of walking they would have to do between them was insane.

Her exploration had likely been more pleasant than the prince's. The entire North Atlantic coast of the island chain was beyond anything she could have imagined. The seaward coast abounded in graceful, grassy moors and magnificent white sand beaches to rival those of far more exotic destinations and sunsets set to stun. It was a lovely haven.

In dramatic contrast, the east coast was barren and rugged though equally breathtaking. Jutting peninsulas and rocky surfaces offered a marked contrast of green grass, gray stone, and white sand coves against the vivid blue of the Minch. The area was also pockmarked with bogs and lochs and a million inlets and caves. Prince Charlie hid successfully somewhere in those coastal hills. Ginny could easily get lost among them. In a lifetime, she could never search them all.

Three times, she thought she'd gotten close.

The night of June 21, 1746 had been the most promising. She'd found specific reference to the night as the one when Prince Charlie met with Flora MacDonald for the first time at a summer shieling—a hut often found in animal pastures—three miles from Ormaclett Castle near the west coast of South Uist, about eleven miles south of her cottage. Ormaclett had proven to be more a stone manor than a castle, and it had been swarming with black-coated Scottish militiamen in

service to the crown. She spent two nights there searching for the shieling with no luck and managed to get spotted by the militiamen in the process. Rummaging through a capacious tote bag for a tiny time travel device while running for her life at a full sprint wasn't something she'd recommend.

Her second possibility, June 23, should have resulted in a win for team Ginny. After meeting with Prince Charlie, Flora MacDonald was said to have traveled north with a maid to Benbecula to enlist the aid of Lady Clanranald, at whose door Ginny now stood. Hoping Flora would lead her to the prince, Ginny visited the village of Cleagorry at the ford between the two islands. Here local militiamen had detained Flora and held her for questioning by the militia commander, Hugh MacDonald of Armadale, who just happened to be a Jacobite sympathizer and Flora's stepfather. He would release her with papers permitting her travel between Benbecula and the Isle of Skye.

The famous journey that would guarantee Prince Charlie's freedom.

The pint-sized village was made up of a sparse dozen blackhouses. It shouldn't have been difficult to locate her. It might not have been if Ginny had gotten the opportunity to search. Unfortunately, the place was thick with more militiamen. Thrice she'd made the attempt and got caught each time. The first time, she'd been thrown into a jail cell. The second, she'd made it all the way to Hugh MacDonald who hadn't appreciated her questions at all. The final time, she'd been captured and carried away by boat. By the time they'd reached solid ground, and she'd been able to free her hands and get hold of the time travel device, she found herself in the middle of nowhere without even GPS to guide her back to civilization.

After that fun-filled adventure, Cleagorry had been crossed off her short list of possibilities.

Living history had its moments. Fixing it was a nightmare. She couldn't imagine how Brontë managed it day in and day out. If she ever got out of this with everyone alive, Ginny swore she'd never meddle with it again.

Thankfully, her third prospect to locate Prince Charlie had been a long shot, one she was thankful hadn't come to fruition after reading accounts left behind by MacEachine. Her narrative wasn't nearly as harrowing in comparison, but getting chased and shot at was getting old fast.

Her many visits to the past had put her on the royalists' radar. She'd managed to become public enemy number two.

*There's a better way to do this.*

Ginny wished she could mute her inner voice or lose a connection with it as easily as her phone disconnected with the world. Yes, she



could go back to Arisaig and follow Coll around for almost two months. More than likely, she'd enjoy every minute of being by his side. Days spent traveling and nights filled with wonder. Her overactive mind had put hour upon hour into pondering the possibilities. Worst case scenarios against the perfect fantasy.

Chances of permanent damage to her heart aside, every move she made with him would only serve to unravel history further. He would alter his path to accommodate her, his speed and distance covered each day. While there were fair odds he might not even find his way back to Prince Charlie with her along. Though such consequences would spare his life, it would not save Burke's and she liked him too much to allow that to happen. She would still have to do what she was doing now to find the older man. By putting this option ahead of the other, she could save both men at the same time. If she failed, there was always the possibility of going back and trying it the other way.

And it gave her time—as she'd considered before—time to get her head in the game.

Time wasn't doing its job, however. It made no sense. She missed Coll far more than she ought to after such short acquaintance. Her days were filled with the anticipation of seeing him again. Her nights permeated with dreams of being in his arms. Of his touch. His kiss. More than once she'd awoken sweaty and aching for him.

More than once she'd awoken drenched in sweat and shaking with residual terror after seeing him lying in a pool of blood, slain for aiding the prince.

Whatever it cost her, she needed to save his life so he could live on.

With or without her.

This was her last opportunity to make things right. She needed to either intercept this Captain O'Neill who should be coming here to retrieve Flora and Lady Clanranald and have him take her back to Prince Charlie. Or become bosom buddies with the woman and be invited along.

Ginny made her way to the front of Nunton House and knocked on the door.

A stocky man in his mid-forties answered. "Aye?"

"I'd like a word with Lady Clanranald, if you please," she said.

"What do ye want wi' milady?"

Most male inhabitants of the Outer Hebrides dressed in much the same fashion. A jacket over a shirt with an optional waistcoat and cravat, belted, knee length kilts, and stockings and brogues. The quality of material was the only thing that set them apart. Whether it was the owner of Nunton House who answered the door, or butler, or

servant was difficult to determine.

What was crystal clear was the suspicion in his eyes. Ginny did her best to hold his gaze steadily and not to fidget. Above all, she'd learned not to rush to defend her presence. A stranger appearing in the area without a good explanation for being there, questioning the locals about where the prince might be—however inconspicuously—had only been met by misgivings over the past two weeks.

She couldn't blame them. For Prince Charlie, these final days in the area were some of the most dangerous he would face, as she discovered firsthand. The Hanoverian militia were closing in on him; he was boxed in on the islands without a way to escape by either land or sea. At one point, there was a mere mile between the prince and disaster. He moved daily, sometimes sleeping in open fields to evade capture.

Ginny hadn't been privy to the details when she'd sent him on his merry way from Arisaig, believing he would be safe. With or without the reward of thirty thousand pounds on his head, it was a miracle Prince Charlie hadn't been caught.

"I'm here to see Lady Clanranald about the welfare of a mutual friend," she told him, crossing her fingers that she wouldn't be turned away.

"Milady isnae taking visitors," he snapped. "Be gone wi' ye."

Not the outcome she needed, Ginny rewound time and tried again. Take two.

"Be gone wi' ye."

This time around, she stuck her foot in the door. She was learning that while the power to reverse time and alter the past provided great opportunity, it also occasionally hurt like hell. Biting back a curse, she pushed against the door.

"I need to see her!" was all she managed before he shoved her out the door and closed it.

Take three.

"What do ye want wi' milady?"

Patience gone, Ginny leveled her dueling pistol between his eyes with her fiercest scowl. She'd picked up the antique dueling pistol from a shop in modern day Balivanich near Nunton House. As firearms were technically illegal in Great Britain, the firing pin had been removed so it wasn't functional. He didn't need to know that.

"I would very much like to speak with her, please. Thank you."

Hands in the air at her prompting, he led the way into the house and attempted to lead her to a different wing of the house. Luckily, she heard female voices and forced him with a wave of the gun to open the door to reveal the women beyond.

Triumph surged through Ginny. Sure, she still had to make nice

while explaining why she'd come armed. Easy enough. Point was, she was making progress after weeks of none.

That euphoria faded the second she stepped into the room. For a moment, she went hot and weak. Her world narrowed down to a heartbeat. There were three women seated inside. One a handsome dark-haired woman in her forties who must have been Lady Clanranald and two younger ladies who looked to be about Ginny's age. One wore a blue muslin robe à la anglaise with red frills on the stomacher and cuffs, her brown hair fashioned into an elegant updo. She was otherwise pleasant of face though nondescript.

The other woman had to be the infamous Flora MacDonald. The woman who'd been charmed by Prince Charlie and charmed him in turn. She was a petite, picture perfect blonde in a pink gown with long, spiraled curls draped over her shoulder to rest on the generous swell of her breasts above the squared neckline. A pout on her red lips, big blue eyes and dark eyelashes fluttering up at...

Numbness swept away Ginny's rush of joy. The pistol dropped to the floor with a clatter as she closed her eyes to block away the sight. Hadn't she pictured it precisely like this from the moment she linked Flora and Coll's names together? The image had stung then. It was nothing compared to having it acted out in real time. Right in front of her.

This was the stuff her nightmares were made of.

## Chapter 31

Flirtation needn't be subtle and difficult to identify when a woman like Peggy MacDonald was involved. Buxom, pleasing to the eye, and well aware of the fact, she'd proven to be a handful over the past week.

Never more so than in that moment.

It took an eternity for Coll to peel her hand off his arm. In that time, he could deduce exactly what was going on in Ginny's mind far more clearly than he could the maelstrom of his own thoughts as they clamored for superiority in his mind.

Considering he'd had months to think about what he'd say and do when and if he saw her again, his inability to summon a cohesive, unified emotion was surprising. A peculiar fusion of elation and desire seized him. He shot to his feet, perhaps compelled by gentlemanly manners. Or perhaps by whatever force pulled him across the space between them. Whatever it was, it was undeniable.

Ginny backstepped as he approached, her unforgettable periwinkle eyes wide with apprehension.

And hurt.

Coll shoved his empathy aside. She wasn't the only one feeling a pinch.

Before he could reach her, Lady Clanranald's steward Angus attacked Ginny from the side and tackled her to the ground. A pistol Coll hadn't noticed before skittered across the floor and landed at his feet. He paid it no mind. His full attention was on Ginny. He was more than familiar with her willingness—nay, ability—to put up a good fight. In his experience, she gave as good as she got and then some.

Now, she went down with nothing more than a single profanity, more an expression of pain than protest as Angus landed on top of her. The steward was a brick of a man, but she didn't so much as struggle. "I've got her, milady."

Quashing the steward's moment of conquest, Coll picked him up and bodily tossed him aside. "Get off her, ye git bastard."

"My word, Mr. MacLeod!" the lady of the house exclaimed, rising to her feet. "Angus, who is this woman?"

"Came to the door wi' a gun in my face—"

Blood pounded in his head joining the cacophony of thought and feeling, Coll heard no more than that. He picked Ginny up off the floor and steadied her as she found her feet. She stared up at him without a

word, eyes round and wary as if she knew how he would react to her unexpected appearance after seven long weeks.

If she did, he wished she'd share the knowledge for he had no clear idea what to say.

"MacLeod! Explain yourself!"

The myriad of concerns and questions and furies that had driven him for the past two months fell to the wayside. One simple need overrode them all. Ignoring the command from across the room, he caved to instinct and pulled Ginny into his arms. She melted against him. Soft and strong. Familiar and foreign. Her hair smelt of sea air and heather. Like home.

"How is it even under the most dire of circumstances, ye always smell so bonny?" he whispered against her ear.

It was not among the pressing questions he'd stockpiled since they'd last met. Neither crucial in nature nor relevant to the situation. Nevertheless, her husky chuckle was a better response than any of the others he could hope to receive.

"I thought you'd be angry when I saw you again," her breath teased his neck.

"I am. I'm furious." Strangely, he was anything but. "How could ye leave me like that?"

She stiffened and pulled away with a pointed look across the room and back again. "Does it matter? It doesn't look like you missed me much."

Hurt suffused her voice. Confused, he followed her gaze to the other side of the room where the three women were all on their feet looking far more baffled than he. Then it all made sense.

Och, she thought he was courting one of the MacDonald lasses.

Coll grimaced as he put it all together. Though every fiber of his being rebelled against it, he pried himself away from her. Regrettably, she wouldn't be entirely wrong in her assumption.

"Mr. MacLeod," Lady Clanranald demanded his attention again in imperious tones. "Will you please explain what is going on here? Who is this woman?"

His hostess deserved an explanation. They all did, given the unspoken purpose of his visit.

"My apologies." He turned to the steward who was dusting himself off. "Angus, to ye as well." The steward glared at him. Coll caught Ginny's hand and towed her across the room. "Milady, may I introduce Miss Hughes."

Ginny managed one of her lopsided curtsies. "Lady Clanranald, please forgive me for the rudeness of my entry. It was vital that I speak with you and this was the only way I could manage it."

"Ye could have asked nicely," Angus grumbled.

"I tried that, ye big oaf," she muttered under her breath as the steward left the room in a huff.

"What could be so important that you bully your way into my drawing room, young lady?" Lady Clanranald asked. "Mr. MacLeod, how do you know this woman?"

"Miss Hughes came to the aid of a particular refugee during his retreat from Culloden, milady. If she's here..." Coll's words trailed off and he stared at Ginny, awash in dread. "If she's here, then he must be in danger. Is that it?"

"I thought you didn't believe I possessed the foresight to see the future."

"I dinnae." Yet he did, as mad as it sounded. "Is that why ye're here?"

"Something like that."

Something in him, a spark deep in the darkness that had consumed him these past months, flickered and died with her affirmation. He'd thought—nay, hoped—she'd come for *him*. To find him. Seeking him out as he'd searched for her.

The truth cut him like a saber through the heart.

Even so, if she was in need of his help to aid the prince, he would give it. Gladly.

"Lady Clanranald," Ginny stepped away from him and addressed the lady of the house. "I understand you were to have met the prince today. I need you to take me to him."

The lady drew herself up regally, her tone offended. "I cannot imagine what you mean."

It wasn't his help she sought, Coll realized. It was Lady Clanranald's. Bold of her to state her allegiances like that. It was treason to support the Stuarts. Over the past several decades, Jacobite supporters had established symbols and phrases to identify their allegiance. Like the popular toast to "the king over the water" in reference to James III.

Either Ginny wasn't aware of the crime itself, or she knew something he did not in regards to the ladies. Aye, the MacDonald of Clanranald had fought on the side of the Jacobites. It made sense that his lady would also sympathize with the cause and by extension her daughter Peggy. Flora, on the other hand, was the stepdaughter of a royalist militia commander and betrothed to an ardent Hanoverian. If she were to report this conversation to either of them, they could all find themselves imprisoned. Or worse.

"Tread lightly, lass," he murmured under his breath.

"Now is not the time for equivocation," she said. "Let's cut to the chase, ladies. I know Flora MacDonald came here several days ago to ask for your assistance in transporting Prince Charlie to the Isle of

Skye.”

“Well, I—”

Cutting off any protest, Ginny continued. “The plan was to use the papers Hugh MacDonald wrote out for Flora to travel with two servants to the Isle of Skye. The prince was to be disguised as Flora’s maid, Betty Burke.”

All three ladies were flabbergasted by her revelation. As was Coll. Once again, Ginny had produced information that by rights, she should not be privy to. Himself, he hadn’t heard so much as a whisper about any such plan since his arrival.

“How could you possibly...?” Hand to her throat, Lady Clanranald stared at Ginny with a mixture of fear and awe.

“You were to have met him in Rossinish today but for some reason have not done so,” Ginny pressed on with a side eye for Coll that clearly labeled him as that reason. “So, I must ask if Captain O’Neill has arrived yet?”

The lady shook her head. Clearly she had no more familiarity with the name than he did. Flora’s face paled, belying her knowledge. “She will see us all imprisoned for treason.”

“Calm down, I’m on your—”

A knock at the door cut Ginny off. Angus stepped in and spoke to his mistress. “Milady, there is a gentleman here to see you on an urgent matter.”

Lady Clanranald looked from the steward to Ginny and back again. “Is it a Captain O’Neill, Angus?”

“Aye, milady.”

\* \* \*

“We need to talk, lass.”

“Do you have plenty of food in here?” Ginny ignored him and addressed the lady of the house as they loaded a crate with supplies from the pantry. “He’ll be hungry.”

“Aye, we have hearts, liver and kidneys,” Peggy answered the question as she came to Coll’s side and looped her arm through his. “I ken how to feed a hungry man.”

“Do you know how to carry anything?” Flora asked, shoving a small valise into Peggy’s hands. “Come now, we’ve got more important things to do.”

“We?” Peggy shot back as she flounced away. “I’ve nothing to do with it!”

“Ginny.”

Coll caught her arm once the two ladies were out of earshot. The simple touch electrified him anew. Thankfully, the shock of seeing her again in the last place he would have ever thought to look had worn off, allowing him to form some coherent thought. Would that he could

forsake the desire to take her in his arms again and leave his questions in the past entirely. Nothing in the past two months had felt so good or right as those few seconds in the drawing room when time and reality melted away leaving only the two of them. The need for an explanation, however, would not be denied.

“Where have ye bee—” Nay, that wasn’t the most important question that had eaten at him over the last two months—“Why did ye leave?”

“I left a note.”

“Bah, one that did no’ fully elucidate yer reasons,” he countered. “Nor did it explain how ye disappeared so completely I couldnae find ye minutes later.”

The confusion and concern of that day, and those that followed, washed over him again. He couldn’t begin to express his worry that something might have happened to her, that the redcoats had returned and found her. The anxiety of not knowing where she was, if she were safe. Or the grief that had suffused him when he found her note and realized she’d gone of her own free will.

“Does it matter?” She kept her back to him as she folded lengths of oiled canvas to protect them from the rain and arranged them in a basket.

“Aye, it matters!”

“Really? I can see you’ve found someone else to keep you company.”

Aware that Lady Clanranald watched them from across the room, he kept his voice low. “’Tis no’ what ye think, lass.”

She spun around with raised brows. “No? So you weren’t holding hands with her when I arrived?” One of the servants passed by and Ginny handed off the basket of linens. “Thank you. Lady Clanranald, is there anything else we need?”

“There’s a wee crate on the bottom shelf there.” The lady pointed at it. When Ginny looked in that direction, the lady cast Coll an inquisitive look. She was taken aback by all Ginny had revealed and perhaps mystified by his reaction to her appearance. She would want answers but knew this was not the time. “Fill it with bottles of whisky from the sideboard in the drawing room. Have Mr. MacLeod carry it down to the boat for you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ginny answered kindly and stooped to retrieve the crate as directed, slapping his hands away when he tried to help.

Coll ran his hands through his hair and followed her to the drawing room. She was as antagonistic as ever. As much as it infuriated him in that moment, he found he missed it. Moreover, in that moment, he also found it comforting. She wouldn’t be so angry if she didn’t care. “I wisnae holding her hand. She was trying to hold



mine.”

“Potato, po-tah-to.” Before he could decipher her meaning, Ginny rolled her eyes. She set the crate on top of the sideboard and bent to retrieve the bottles as directed. “Why are we even having this discussion? It’s the same shit in a different century. I’ll never be blonde enough, or petite enough, or pretty enough. I even saw it coming.”

She might as well have been speaking in a foreign tongue. “I have nae idea what ye refer to, lass.”

Straightening, she slammed a bottle down on the sideboard. “I refer to Flora MacDonald.”

As so often happened with Ginny, he was awash in a sea of confusion. “Flora? What has this to do wi’ her?”

“Really?” She filled the crate with more violence than necessary. “You know what? I don’t have time for this.”

Lifting the crate, she spun around like a whirlwind and tried to leave the room. Coll blocked her path. “Time for what? I hivnae seen ye in two months and all ye want to do is argue wi’ me. ’Tis I who is the aggrieved party, lass. Ye left me, aye? Should anyone have the right to be angry, ’tis I.”

He had been. Once he realized that she fled into the night rather than face him, he’d been suffused by it before it vanished in a flash. Coll willed it to return now but couldn’t summon an iota of it when he was so inwardly gladdened by her reappearance.

“I looked for ye,” he admitted quietly. “When I couldnae find ye, I feared ye’d fallen into royalist hands. Then I found yer note. It was days before I could accept that that ye’d fled of yer own free will.”

Ginny stared down at the bottles of alcohol as if they held the answers to life’s mysteries. “Days then was all you needed before you forgot about me and came to court Flora MacDonald.”

He had no need for anger when she bore enough for both of them. Her gaze flickered to him, wide and wary beneath her lashes. If he didn’t miss his guess, she was jealous and was hurt by what she saw as his betrayal.

“Dinnae look at me like that when ye’re the one who left me behind wi’out a word. Besides, ’tis no’ Flora I was...er, Flora is betrothed to Allan MacDonald, lass.”

Her brow puckered. “You mean the brunette is Flora? Then who is —” She cut herself off with an abrupt jerk of her head. “You know what? It’s none of my business who you want to marry, is it?”

Coll blocked her path again as she tried to walk around him. “Is it no’? Are ye saying ye dinnae care?”

Peggy appeared at the door, lips pursed. “Mother sent me to hurry you along.”

"We're coming now," he answered.

"There is no 'we'," Ginny told him as Peggy flounced away. "You're not coming."

Of all the things nonsensical things she'd said since arriving at Nunton, that was the most confounding. "Of course, I am." He reached for the crate and took it from her. "I will do what is necessary to restore a Stuart to the throne as I did before."

"No!" She made a grab for the box. "I won't have you risk your life."

He held tight. "I will take the risk, same as ye, lass."

She hung on tenaciously. The tug of war sent the bottles clanging against one another. "This isn't about Prince Charlie anymore. It's about you."

"What?"

"It isn't the prince who is in danger. It's you." He stared at her, dumbfounded by her revelation. "And I didn't spend the last two weeks trying to find you to watch you walk straight into the line of fire."

"Ye saw this wi' yer sight?"

"Yes, dammit. So, you're staying here where you're safe."

"Ye did come searching for me." The realization warmed him.

"Yes. This is not where I expected to find you. I'll say that, though. And now that I have found you, you need to stay here."

She tugged on the crate again and he held it out of her reach. "I will. If ye remain wi' me, I'll stay."

"I can't." Ginny gave up the fight for the crate and crossed her arms over her chest. He expected to see exasperation reflected in her eyes. Instead, there was only apprehension. "I can't do that. It isn't you alone who will die if I don't see this through, Coll. It's Mr. Burke."

Her knowledge was far reaching, disjointed. It made no sense. "How can ye ken this, Ginny?"

The steward, Angus, appeared at the door, his round, florid face a sharp contrast against his silver hair. "An English frigate has weighed anchor a few miles away. We maun leave now."

"Freakin' Campbell," Ginny ground out through clenched teeth. "Why can't those books ever get it right?"

## Chapter 32

*The eastern coast of the Isle of Benbecula, Scotland  
Later that afternoon*

“Mr. Burke, I’ve missed you.”

While she able to restrain herself eight weeks ago, relief compelled her to hug the older man tight. Being his usual taciturn self, he took it like a pro and even gave her back a few awkward pats.

“I may have missed ye a wee tetch as well, lassie.”

Ginny grinned at him as he pulled away. “Oh stop! I’m going to get all weepy.”

He harrumphed but allowed a small smile. “Dinnae miss yer cookin’ though.”

With a laugh, she turned to Prince Charlie as he summoned her. She took his outstretched hand and clasped it between hers, rather than kissing it as the other ladies had, and bobbed a curtsy. She liked to think they’d moved beyond such formalities.

Moreover, treating a man like royalty while he clutched a damp plaid around his naked body seemed excessive.

“Miss Hughes, I cannot imagine why you did not come earlier to spare me these trials.”

“I should have hated to deprive you of all the fun, your highness.”

“Fun? I’ve become the roe we once stalked these past weeks. Hunted across moor and mountain like wild game,” he told her. “Either God is testing my steadfastness or He’s given up on me entirely. This very day I spent hours under the inadequate shelter of a rock ledge whilst a deluge of water soaked me through. To say nothing of the midges that have dined upon my flesh.”

“About that.” She dug into her bag and removed the ceramic jar of ointment she’d carefully removed the modern labelling from. “I come with a peace offering to help with the bites. If you’ll allow me?”

He nodded and moved off to the far corner of the tiny room. Ginny followed, passing by Coll as Burke greeted him with a hearty handshake. “God love ye, lad.”

“The position has been filled, I believe.”

Ginny immediately regretted her petty retort. Regretted, for purely practical reasons, that he was here at all.

The past few hours of travel from Nunton south then through the strait between Benbecula and South Uist before rounding the island

allowed her to recover from the impact of his physical presence. The Clanranalds' *birlinn* was a small boat common in the Outer Hebrides where most travel was done by water. This one bore a single sail but could also accommodate a dozen oarsmen. There had been five plus O'Neill and Coll who could be trusted with the sensitive nature of their mission. Auld Donald MacLeod had been among them, as cantankerous as ever. She'd taken an oar on the boat while the other ladies huddled under a canopy with the intention of balancing out the shorthanded crew and avoiding eye contact with Coll who'd rowed from behind her.

Under normal circumstances, the zen of repetitive motion of rowing should have proven more therapeutic, even more so than rock climbing. Now, with his eyes upon her the entire time, it gave her plenty of time to quietly stress over his presence.

The arrival of fifteen hundred Campbell troops near Nunton—hours earlier than her research indicated, curse it—necessitated that Coll evacuate with them. His life was back in her hands, however incapable they might be.

No pressure. None at all. What was more stress on top of that already weighing on her mind? On her conscience? Her undertaking had grown exponentially since the initial mission to fix her first teeny weeny mistake. A mushroom cloud of accountability that had yet to diminish.

Then again, classifying any aspect of time travel as teeny weeny had probably been her first misstep. Now there were too many to count. First and foremost, she needed to remove Coll and Burke from the conversation and get them out of this alive.

Unless removing them from the big picture left the prince vulnerable once more. Then it was back to square one. Not a place she wanted to revisit.

With a sigh, Ginny tried to quash her worries by focusing on what she could do.

She joined Prince Charlie where he sat on a stool in the corner. Flora and Peggy began unloading food for the men while the men wrung out their sodden clothing. Ginny was soaked as well but decided the prince's discomfort outweighed her own. He let the plaid slip off his shoulders and she cringed at the sight. Reading about the agony he'd endured and knowing he'd carry the scars for life was far different than seeing it for herself.

MacEachine's journals had recounted the nitty gritty details of the trials the prince endured on the week-long journey from the west coast of Benbecula to the eastern in preparation for their departure for the Isle of Skye. Their crossing had been as therapeutic as hers. According to what she'd read, they sailed in the most miserable

weather imaginable, getting stuck overnight on a tidal island during high tide.

From there they'd crossed over land, sleeping in primitive huts or the bottom of rowboats with no shelter from the rain with only some milk and cheese they begged off some local tenants by pretending to be Irish refugees from Culloden. A cowherd had taken pity on the prince and offered the three men—the prince, Burke, and MacEachine—this tiny, single room bothy to shelter them where they all collapsed in exhaustion and slept like the dead while Captain O'Neill went to fetch Flora and Lady Clanranald after they failed to make their rendezvous.

As the tale went, the cowherd's wife arrived at dawn to warn them that militiamen were expected to arrive to buy milk, so Prince Charlie had spent most of the day—this day—out in the driving rain only partially sheltered by a rock outcropping being tortured by midges.

No wonder the prince thought he was cursed.

Had Ginny found Flora earlier, she might have had to make the harrowing trip with them. As it was, she'd spent several days in a row scouring the area MacEachine mentioned while eluding the militia, hoping to stumble upon this bothy. She'd thought she probably walked right past it a dozen times given the pouring rain and limited visibility when in fact, they were nowhere near the location MacEachine stated but closer to the coast of Loch Uiskevagh north of Rarnish—so many miles south of Rossinish it was practically on a different island.

Glowering at MacEachine, she mourned the fact that she'd been unable to arrive earlier to offer solace to the prince. She set about dabbing the bug bites with the balm. "I had no idea what you would have to endure, your highness. I'm so sorry there wasn't more I could have done."

"You are no more sorry than I," Prince Charlie replied with a strained sigh that seemed to draw the energy from him. "Not for myself but for the hardships of those who have supported me. More tales of Cumberland's atrocities have reached my ears. You were right about him, Miss Hughes. What he has done...The fault is mine."

This was a new version of Prince Charlie. Compassion for those who suffered for his cause. Ownership of the responsibility. Somehow as he tramped his way across these islands, he'd alleviated his existential crises. To survive all that he had thus far only proved he possessed greater inner strength than history gave him credit for.

Flora came with a tin cup filled with whisky for the prince. "Many thanks, Miss MacDonald." He lifted it in silent toast. "If there is one thing my skulking these past months has taught me, it is to take a

hearty dram when offered.”

Ginny refrained from pointing out his borderline alcoholism and waited to speak until Flora departed. “You’re wrong, your highness. I know you dislike hearing those words. In this case, they are necessary. The fault for what has been done is Cumberland’s alone. Never forget that.”

“Will history agree?” His smile was tight. He drank more deeply from the cup. “Can you see so far?”

There was no upside in telling him that history would lay all the fault fully at his feet for centuries to come. Only in recent years, her time, had those conclusions been debunked.

“Not clearly. I’m sorry.”

“And the days to come? Pray, what brings you to me again?”

What could she say other than the truth, that her visit had nothing to do with him. She could offer him a glimpse into the weeks and months of more running and hiding that awaited him before he found his way to freedom, but the poor guy was already down. It would be cruel to rub his face in it. Besides, given how far off her research books were, she had no hard facts to provide him that might be debunked in the days ahead.

“I wanted to assure you that you are on the right path,” she told him because he looked like he could use the reassurance. “I know it has been a rocky one thus far. I wish I could tell you that it will be over soon, but it will take time yet to escape. With patience and fortitude, it will all end well.”

He raised a dubious brow. “You’re saying it’s going to be hell but there is nothing we can do to change it.”

“Basically.”

“So be it.” He lifted his cup in silent toast and emptied it. “I’ve experienced a share of foresight myself. Rather hindsight, in this case. I knew should I encounter you again I would find you in MacLeod’s company. Tell me, has he asked for your hand?”

“No.” Ginny fought down a blush. The bothy was meant only to house a few men, now there were ten of them. Even with their oarsmen in another hut, the space was tight enough that anyone could overhear him. “I only just came upon Mr. MacLeod today when I arrived at Nunton.”

“Pity. As you said, I dislike being wrong.” Glancing from her to Coll and back again, Prince Charlie pursed his lips. “I am not convinced that I am, given the way he watches you. Mark my word, Miss Hughes. I don’t believe I will be in error in the end.”

He was in error. Obviously in the end she and Coll would go their separate ways. There was no other course of action.

“Standard wager?”

“Standard wager.”

\* \* \*

“It’s been a surprise, to be honest. Charles Edward has proven himself a hearty man, not given to complaining despite the hardships we’ve endured. Kept us from starvation if ye want to ken the truth of it. Spends most days fishing or hunting waterfowl or moorcocks. Took down a running deer at long range. Impressed all those chieftains wi’ his marksmanship.”

“Hmm.”

“Good thing. Those who called rarely brought more than whisky and wine, wanting to share a toast wi’ him. Drinks like a fish, though. Never kent anyone who imbibes so much...”

“Hmm.”

“Has an eye for the ladies. Flora MacDonald seemed much taken by him.”

“Hmm.”

“Nor does Ginny Hughes seem immune to his charm.”

Coll blinked and stared at Burke. “What? Why would ye say that?”

The older man offered a rare grin and pushed a tin cup filled with whisky across the top of the battered table they sat at. “Wanted to see if ye were listening to me, lad.”

“Of course, I’m listening.” Coll sipped from the cup, welcoming the familiar burn. “I’m gladdened to see ye again. Where else would my attention be?”

“Where else indeed.” Burke cast a pointed look to where Ginny and the prince huddled in the corner.

Coll knew she was offering succor to the prince. She had said as much and held a jar of ointment in one hand as proof. Seeing her touch all parts of Prince Charlie’s bare chest and torso, however... Och, the sight was more disturbing than he cared to admit.

He longed for a chance to speak with her, to try to understand her absence and reasons for abandoning him at the cave. Instead through the long journey, he’d been allowed no more than a glimpse beyond her back. Her unyielding posture as she pulled an oar with the men instead of hiding from the rain with the women.

Och, she was soaked to the bone, dripping and bedraggled. Even so, she was still the bonniest lass he’d ever seen. More than anything, he yearned to take her in his arms again. Nothing else mattered when she was with him. She calmed his mind and soothed his troubled soul. Let him see the past clearly, set the horrible things he’d done behind him, and look to the future. Her friendship was everything. She was passion and life.

His passion. His life.

“Shame she dinnae find ye earlier,” he told Burke in denial of the

truth of his feelings on the matter. "She could have helped him sooner."

"Aye, we heard rumor of a lass questioning the locals about the prince's location these past several days." Burke glanced over his shoulder at the pair again. "Her methods of inquiry are as bad as her cooking. Thank God, we will have none of that this night, aye? Och, I hear she went about bleating his name to any who gave pause to listen to her. The royalists are after her, same as us now."

"She did the same wi' Lady Clanranald. Nae discretion a'tall." Coll batted down the urge to confide in the older man. Such familiar conversation would not be welcomed. "How does the prince fare beyond the obvious? He looks rather the worse for wear."

Burke shrugged. "He's been in low spirits. As I said, he's spent a fair amount of time keeping us well fed. The locals would bring by bread and cheese or goat's milk. The visiting chieftains were a blessing and a curse. As I said, if ye were truly listening, they'd bring wi' them whisky and wine. More than the prince needed. They also bore news of Cumberland's rampage across the Hielands. Looting, burning, and raping as he searches for the prince. Och, 'tis not the days we spend out here that dishearten him, puir lad. The burden upon him is great."

Coll studied Prince Charlie's ragged features. "Aye, I imagine it is. At least O'Sullivan isnae here to further poison his mind. Where is he?"

"Prince had enough of his doomsaying and tossed him out on his ear." Burke scratched his jaw and glanced at the pair in the corner. "He'll no' be glad to hear more bad news from the lass."

"She said 'tis no' the prince she's come to aid this time," he confessed. "'Tis ye and I."

The older man's brow rose. "I thought we agreed she is nae seer."

"Aye." Coll tipped up his cup, watching Ginny over the rim. "I dinnae like the portent of doom any more than ye. I dinnae believe dismissing the danger will spare us."

Burke's nod confirmed the opinion. "Do ye ken what the danger is?"

"Nay."

"Does she?"

An interesting question. For all her foreknowledge, Ginny's grasp of the fine details thus far had proven vague. Knowing that a threat awaited them at the beginning without being aware of Prince Charlie's presence among them, for example. Or her surprise today at finding him at Nunton. Or the arrival of Captain Campbell's troops, but not the precise time.

*Why can't those books ever get it right?*

Aye, it was like she'd read a synopsis of events rather than an



accounting of specific incidents. Similar to his courses in history at university. A curious comparison to make, yet a valid one.

Just one more thing about her that made no sense.

She finished with the prince and weaved through the crowded room toward the door. He couldn't stop himself from watching her, even knowing all eyes, including Lady Clanranald's and Peggy's, were on him. As much as it gladdened his heart to see Ginny again, he needed answers more than ever. To the questions she left him with and the new ones she presented today.

The time had come for some truth.

## Chapter 33

A reckoning was coming. One she knew she could no longer avoid. As the rain had stopped and the clouds thinned, Ginny strolled away from the bothy then along the edge of the steep slope that led down to one of the hundreds of coves carved into the side of the island. She focused on wringing the water from her skirt as if she didn't know she wasn't alone. She'd known Coll would follow. Maybe subconsciously she'd readied the stage for the confrontation to come.

Twilight had fallen. To the west the shadowed underbelly of the clouds glowed with red and orange amid black recesses. Across the water to the east, the dark purple sky churned with the rain that was to come. Between the two, this place was the far side of heaven. A better spot for long walks and lovers, rather than confessions and enmity.

Over the past two weeks, there were times when it had all been so overwhelming. She'd wished for a shoulder to cry on, arms to comfort. At one point, she would have even been glad to see Donell. Now there was a chance it could be Coll. If she could find a way to explain it all.

*Bring it on. You got this, Gin.*

Not really. Nice pep talk, nonetheless.

A sudden chill roused a wealth of goosebumps. It may have been the byproduct of the stiff breeze of the Minch that tugged at her damp skirt and hair. Or it could be a cautionary alert to prepare herself to be bludgeoned by questions.

What she got was a tin cup handed to her.

"Ye look like ye could use a drink."

"I could. Thank you." She took the cup and downed a healthy swallow as he fell into step an arm's length away. The whisky burned a path to her nervous stomach then reached out like rays of sunshine to warm the rest of her. Or was that because of Coll's presence?

Coming upon him so unexpectedly today after weeks of searching had come as a huge surprise. She'd almost forgotten how handsome he was and how the sight of him in that kilt could turn her to mush. Her insides had lit up like fireworks, and for a split second before the tableau before her coalesced, she'd wanted to run to him, throw her arms around him, and stay there for an hour or more. He'd teased her about smelling good. It hadn't been any different for her. His manly scent had transported her back to that night in the cave. She'd missed him desperately.

Realizing he hadn't felt the same had been akin to a blow to the solar plexus.

That didn't stop the heartfelt confession from slipping out. "So you know, you smelled really good, too."

"No' any longer."

There was a hint of humor in his brogue. She looked up to see it written on his face.

"No, neither of us smells like a rose garden right now."

His soft smile hit her with a sigh of relief and a rush of desire at the same time. She drank him in, noting for the first time the short growth of beard shadowing his jaw. The breeze tousled his longer hair. The rest of him recalled her dreams.

"I want to apologize for leaving as I did," she said into the cup before she lost her nerve. "It was cowardly and cruel. I've beaten myself up for it a million times."

"Why did ye do it?"

The question was soft, kindly spoken when she deserved his anger. Ginny searched his face for clues about what he was thinking. Then again, simply because she'd missed him so much.

"Besides being overwhelmed and frankly rather frightened by the magnitude of what we'd shared?"

He tensed at the admission with a sharp intake of breath. "Aye, beyond that."

"In the end, I thought it best to stay away and let you reassume your natural course," she told him, steeling herself from throwing herself into his arms. "I was afraid you wouldn't return to Dunchleach if I stayed, and I knew I had to let you go home."

"I dinnae go home. I went looking for ye."

"Yes, but after that?"

Kilt flapping around his legs, Coll leaned his hips against a boulder and crossed his arms over his chest. Everything about his posture bespoke indifference. Yet it couldn't hide the taut pain in his voice. "Nay."

Her jaw sagged. "Why not? I know you wanted to."

"And I still do. As soon as I ken I'll be welcome. To that end, I was *considering* courting Peggy MacDonald," he clarified. "That was all ye witnessed earlier. Nae more than a perfunctory effort, at that. Having done so once, I dinnae court wi' my heart."

Hers clenched at the admission. She'd hurt him more than she'd imagined. "Then why do it at all?"

He shrugged, still aloof despite his revealing words. "I toyed wi' the idea that returning wi' a bride in hand would please my father and make him more amenable to my return."

She wouldn't admit how much that hurt. She hated herself for

asking in the first place. The question was driven by the same knee-jerk reaction to seeing him with someone else at Nunton.

*This isn't about you, girl.*

No, excessive emotion and weeks of fantasizing about what could be were no excuse for petty jealousy. Coll was right. She'd left *him*. She had no right to be hurt or angry with him for moving on without her. No right to do anything to lure him back to her only to leave him again when this mission was complete. He was free to live his life as he pleased. If that meant marrying Peggy MacDonald—not Flora, as she thought—then that was his choice.

In the end, it all boiled down to a simple fact. She wanted him to be happy as much as she needed him to be safe. Now and after she departed for good.

A truly decent human being would encourage him on that path, wherever it led him. Especially when Ginny knew there could be nothing permanent between them. The admonition did nothing to ease the nausea and pain invoked by the thought of Coll with another woman.

In fact, she deserved the pain. That didn't stop her from gulping down the remainder of the whisky to burn it away.

"You've been here all this time?"

"Nay, no' more than a day. As I said, I've been looking for ye."

For two months? How could he even look at her? A thousand regrets ripped chunks from her heart. That wasn't how it was supposed to go. She was supposed to be a fleeting fancy. Nothing more. She groped inside her bag, eager to turn back the clock and undo this madness.

"I went as far as Rosebraugh Castle looking for ye."

Rosebraugh Castle. Ginny froze, the time travel device forgotten. Why did that sound so familiar?

He answered the unspoken question for her. "I thought to find Hugh Urquhart and ask him where ye may have gone. I found Keir MacCoinnach, Urquhart's cousin and heir, there instead. He told me his cousin had not returned to Scotland prior to the battle and did, in fact, recently die of an infection in Paris."

"How convenient."

He nodded. "Aye, I thought so as well, though he wouldnae say more. As I was leaving, I was met by a wee spit of a lass. His new wife, a colonist like yerself. She said her name was Al. Aye, Al. Nae more, nae less. No' Duchess of Ross or even Mistress MacCoinnach. She wanted to know why I searched for Urquhart."

"What did you tell her?"

"The truth. As I kent it at any rate," Coll turned his head toward her, but with the setting sun at his back, she couldn't make out his

expression from this distance. "That ye, another colonial lass, out for an evening stroll on the night of the battle at the Drummossie Muir had gone to Urquhart Castle in search of the duke, that ye dinnae ken it was naught but a ruin. Nevertheless, ye kent the impending danger to the prince."

A quiver went through her. "And what did she say?"

"Her precise words were, 'Ye're shitting me.'"

Astonishment dulled Ginny's perception. She must have heard him wrong. But no, Coll scrutinized her, awaiting her reaction. The one he knew was coming, because she had said the same thing to him once, and it wasn't exactly a common saying.

At least in this era.

She longed to repeat it now. It was perfectly suited for the occasion.

"Just like that?"

His head bobbed in a crisp nod. "Aye. Unusual, is it no'? No' only the words themselves, but to have them enunciated just so in yer bland colonial accent?"

Beyond unusual or even coincidental. "And what more did you say? I know you too well to believe you left it at that."

"I asked her what had really happened to Urquhart."

Ginny said nothing, holding her breath for what was to come.

"She said she imagined ye already kent the truth and I should ask ye. Moreover, she asked if ye ever had the chance, her husband would be glad for some news regarding his cousin's welfare from ye or an auld man called Donell." His head cocked to the side, his eyes glittering in the twilight. "Odd favor to ask of a lass she's never met. Or has she?"

Numb, she shook her head. "No, we've never met."

Wow. Obviously this Al was another of Donell's projects. How many were there? She rotated the tin cup in her hands, needing a minute to think. To come to terms with the breadth of Donell's reach through time.

"Is there naught else ye wish to share?"

*Suck it up and tell him the truth.*

"Not at the moment," she denied her conscience.

Staring out over the water provided no inspiration about what to say, so she turned back to Coll. Now that the glaring sun had dipped over the horizon, she could make out his features again. He waited, the picture of patience apart from a clenched jaw. How she longed to see affection there again. Desire. Anything but this inflexible restraint. Then again, it would be unfair to wish for more when she would only crush his affection again in the days ahead. Reaching into her bag, she curled her fingers around the ceramic device and withdrew it.

“Come now, lass. Ye dinnae have a basket or crate at hand to fashion more distance between us. It may be days more before we have another moment alone. I need to ken what is going on here.”

He caught her arm and drew her closer. The tightly leashed emotion in the words almost broke her more than the stinging haste with which he released her. All she wanted to do was turn back the clock to that moment when he’d taken her in his arms and held her as if nothing of the past two months mattered any longer. As if the world around them were irrelevant. If she could, she would have frozen time and relished those precious seconds for an eternity. She had no desire to hurt him further.

“How do ye ken what’s going to happen? What are ye no’ telling me? I cannae stan—*oof!*” He went down on one knee as she tackled him. “Bugger it, lass—”

“I’m so sorry to do this.”

\* \* \*

“What was that?” Coll groaned, shielding his eyes from the bright sun. “Och, did I black out? How long have I been unconscious?”

“You haven’t.” Ginny rubbed his back in comforting circles as she chewed her lower lip, trying to figure out the best way to explain what she’d done. “Take a deep breath. Relax.”

Great advice she ought to take herself. A knot was building in her gut about how to explain what she’d done. A blunt *We’re in a different time* seemed a terrible place to start. How had Brontë managed it with Tris?

Such an abrupt transition hadn’t been part of the plan. Over this shoulder, she’d spotted a quartet of militiamen farther up the coast at the same moment they saw her and Coll. It would have been disastrous if they’d been caught or led them back to Prince Charlie. In that split second with the device already at hand, the push of a button seemed the easiest way to escape.

Explaining it wouldn’t be so simple.

“Ye knocked me down. Why?”

Rubbing his stomach, he straightened and looked around the deserted landscape. In a few weeks when tourist season hit with the brute force of a hurricane, it would be a different story. For now, as it had been almost three centuries before, this part of Benbecula was sparsely populated. The vibrant green moor was sprinkled with bluebells rather than muddy and sodden with rain. Waves splashed over the beach below with a gentle rush rather than a roaring crash. Really, other than a partly sunny day in place of an overcast evening, there wasn’t a figurative slap in the face to welcome him to the future.

It was still enough to confound him.

“I maun have blacked out if day is upon us. Och, my innards have

gone amuck. Pray, did I eat yer cooking and disremember? Tell me true."

"Very amusing," she said with a wry twist of her lips. "Burke would approve of your humor. But no. There were some militiamen about to come upon us. I'm afraid I had to do something rather drastic before they captured us."

Coll stiffened, his now alert gaze scanning the perimeter. "Where are they? We cannae lead them to the prince."

That was exactly what she'd been afraid of. That she would once again put written history through the shredder and put Prince Charlie in danger. Every minute she spent lingering in the past only opened up more opportunities to screw things up more than she already had.

Look what she'd done now. Cue the confessional. She didn't have much of a choice about it anymore.

"I'm glad you agree." Ginny took his arm and led him to a low rock bulging from the ground. "Here, sit, and let me explain."

He did, then turned away from her, following the path of a sailboat on the Minch. His brow puckered into deep furrows. "What is that boat? What have ye done?"

Regret washed over her for the brutal manner in which he had to learn the truth.

"You wanted to know my secret, Coll. This is it. I'm from the future."

## Chapter 34

### *Present Day*

He wanted to accuse her of repaying his jest in kind. She dropped down on her haunches before him, her bonny periwinkle eyes filled with regret and sympathy. Not a hint of amusement. Something she'd once said about cracked people never knowing they're cracked popped into his mind out of nowhere. Coll couldn't determine if it were to be employed in reference to her or himself in this instance.

Obviously, it was she. Such a revelation as this "secret" was madness. From the future? It was as inconceivable as believing she could see the future despite evidence to the contrary.

"Dinnae talk mince, lass. What happened?"

"I transported us out of the past to evade the soldiers." Her warm hands clasped his, her thumbs drawing slow circles on his palm that might have been erotic had he a clearer mind. "Much the same way that Hugh Urquhart accidentally fell into a doorway between your time and mine. That's why his cousin lied about him dying and why this Al you met said I would know the truth. I believe she is like me. A visitor in your time. It is unbelievable, ridiculous, whatever you prefer to call it, but it is the truth."

"Ye're off yer heid."

Coll searched the horizon again. The blue water. The sun. The weather cooler than it had been of late. The sail he'd spotted moments before was no more than a speck in the distance. Beyond day replacing night—for which he could summon no logical excuse—the lack of empirical evidence to support Ginny's balderdash provided grounds for skepticism. Setting aside such absurdities for the moment, he focused instead on the more comprehensible and urgent matter.

"The prince. We need to assure his safety."

"We have time. Nothing will happen to him before we return," she assured him. "If you prefer, though, we can go straightaway."

What he wanted to do was continue the conversation they'd begun and get the answers he needed. About her departure and the equally puzzling events of the last two months. Regrettably, his current environs troubled him far more than those, in a manner he couldn't express. First things first. He nodded. "Aye."

With an encouraging squeeze of his hands, she stood. Her smile was forced. "Great. We do need to uh...position ourselves to greater



advantage before we return. Would it be best to first warn the prince, do you think? Or get behind the soldiers and subdue them?"

"We dinnae have time to warn the prince." Grateful to have something else to think about, he considered it. He touched the weaponry tucked into his belt. "I have a pistol and my dirk and sword. Do ye have yer pistol?"

"Yes, but it won't fire."

"No' even its single shot?"

"No. But as I said, time is on our side." Coll ignored Ginny's matter-of-fact turn of phrase and watched as she rotated back the way they'd come. "Is the bothy that way, do you think?"

"For a lass who can recall the finest detail on a map, I find myself surprised by that question."

She spun around to face him again. This time a playful grin curved her lips and his insides clenched far more pleasantly than they had moments before. How he'd missed her humor, the smiles that lit her face with astonishing radiance.

"If I'd seen it on a map, I'd be able to point to it on a map," she told him. "Otherwise, I have a terrible sense of direction. There was this one day some soldiers caught me and dragged me off— I had no idea where I was and no GPS...uh, map to lead me back to where I started. It was a nightmare."

As it had the day she'd left him, the thought of Ginny being apprehended by royalist soldiers both agitated and enraged him. All thought of her absurd revelation fell to the wayside. He jumped to his feet and took her by the shoulders. "Soldiers took ye? Did they harm ye? How did ye get away?"

"The same way we just escaped the ones I saw," was her unsettling answer.

She tilted her head back, staring up at him. Her expression softened. He flinched involuntarily as she touched his chest. A warm, tingling path lingered as her hands slid up to his shoulders. Her bright eyes glistened before a tear fell to her cheek. "I'm so sorry about the way I've done this, Coll. Honestly, I'm sorry about everything. I've missed you more than I can say. I owe you more than I can say. It was poor thanks to leave you the way I did."

The rest of the world faded to a blur. The anger, the worries of weeks past. The uncertainty of Prince Charlie's escape and the unforgiving actuality of the situation he currently found himself in. There was only Ginny and the sweet balm of her presence. Of her touch.

"I shouldnae have pushed ye." He caught the tear with the pad of his thumb. "I merely wanted ye to ken that I wanted to be wi' ye."

"Yes, I understand what you said in the cave." She pressed her

cheek into his hand and covered it with her own. "I hadn't anticipated it or I would have thought it through. I'm sorry. An extended affair simply wasn't a possibility."

"Affair?" Astonishment curled his fingers against her silken cheek. "I was trying to propose to ye, ye daft lass."

Confusion clouded her features even before he released her. She closed her eyes and he imagined her replaying the moment in her mind. "Propose? No, you weren't."

Frustration suffused him. Coll ran his hands over his head. "Did I no' say I would speak wi' yer father?"

Clearly at a loss, her head continued to swing back and forth. Her eyes held his, however, wide with bewilderment. "Yes, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Bugger it all, lass!" Again, his hands swept over his head. This time his fingers curled into his hair. For a lass who could recall any detail with perfect clarity, she was remarkably narrow in her recollection. "To ask him for his blessing! All those days spent in that blasted cave, I'd been waiting for the chance to ask ye."

"To marry you?"

"Aye! To marry me!" As if repetition would increase her understanding.

"Wow, I guess I owe Prince Charlie that five shillings after all. Really?"

"Aye. Ye were the bride I wanted to bring home to Dunchleach, lass. No' Peggy."

Comprehension flooded her eyes. Rather than throw herself into his arms, however, she pulled away, lips compressed into a thin line. "We should go save the prince."

Coll caught her before she could turn away. "Nay, lass. Ye dinnae get to run from me again. Have ye nothing more to say to my proposal?"

Her jaw worked, as fire such as he'd never seen from her lit her eyes and brought a flush to her cheeks. "I'm not a trophy or a bargaining chip, Coll. Been there, done that. I won't be used to get back on your father's good side."

God save him from obtuse women. "That's no' why—"

"Besides," she interrupted. "I have no desire to ever put myself under a man's thumb again."

Having been privy to the details of her previous marriage, the argument was valid. Yet he couldn't believe she thought him capable of such oppression.

"I dinnae want ye under my thumb, lass. I want ye by my side!"

Her resolve wavered, then resolidified. Coll threw up his hands. "I think ye take a particular joy in vexing me, lass. Devil take it, I

shouldnae enjoy yer obstinance so much. This however... Och, by rights, I should rue the day I met ye."

"Rue it? Would you undo it all?" Hands on her hips, she met his glare without flinching. "You want me to take it all back? I can. Right back to day one, if you want. Then you wouldn't ever have to be so vexed."

The baffling offer took the wind from his sails. "What are ye havoring about, lass? Take what back?"

She waved a wee white object in his face, temper unabated. "See this? The thing that brought you here with me? With one touch, I can go back to the day we met and make it as if it never happened. Let history play out as it was originally meant to. No more day to rue. How about that?"

An ominous chill raked his body like claws capable of cleaving her memory from his very flesh. Coll stilled, staring at the object as if it were a harbinger of death. Her meaning was clear enough, yet he asked anyway. "What do ye mean?"

"You wouldn't remember any of it."

The claws were back, burrowing into his chest. "Ye mean, I wouldnae remember ye."

"Would that be the worst thing?"

Her tone mocked as if she knew the answer. For the first time, he realized that for all her insight, she knew nothing of what was in his heart. She viewed herself from a perspective where she was weighed, judged, and found wanting, and overlaid that estimation unto how others saw her. As if she had no merit. It was as if having been subjugated once, she continued to picture herself as the inferior in a relationship, rather than consider the possibility of an equal partnership. She had no measure of her worth as a companion, a helpmate, and lover. It made sense now, how she attempted to perpetuate a rift between them. To hide her own feelings.

He'd seen beneath those fears, knew her beyond those sensibilities. Ginny gave of her heart to those around her. He wanted a life where he could give her a piece of his own.

And she wanted to take that from him?

"Why no' take my heart from my chest?" he whispered. Enclosing the hand holding what he could only see now as a weapon, he drew her closer. "Och, lass, how can ye no' ken what is so obvious to everyone else?"

Her long lashes swept her cheeks but did not lift again so he might see what her eyes revealed. "I ken naught of this mad tale ye spin of time and naught of what the future holds, but I ken ye, lass. I ken what is undeniable." Catching her stubborn chin, he tried to meet her eye. "Will ye look no' at me?"

Although she shook her head, she leaned her cheek against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, drawing her stiff body against him. He brushed his lips to the top of her head and was answered by a shudder that wracked her body.

“Ginny, lass. I—”

“Please don’t say it,” she rasped out. Again, her action belied word. Her arms slid around his waist and held him tight.

“Have ye no’ said I should be free to speak of feeling and emotion wi’ ye?”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Coll. Not again.”

Coll had always considered himself a pragmatic man. There were no guarantees in life. Too often it brought pain. Death and loss could come at any time. Risk lie everywhere. Risk to life and limb. To ambition and aspiration. That did not negate the incentive to act or to take joy where one could. He’d gambled time and again on the slim chance for reward. He’d gone to university to study rather than devoting himself to the church as his mother wanted. Defied his father and supported Prince Charlie’s claim to the throne. Gambled with his life on the battlefield to defend the integrity of his country. Even in efforts where he failed, he’d taken consolation in knowing he’d done the right thing.

And he was right about Ginny.

One didn’t refuse a chance to dance in the rain because they feared the storm that might come.

“Ye think I risk heartache wi’ ye, *mo ghrá*? Come what may, I willnae dwell upon regret knowing I have loved ye. ’Tis all the solace I need.” He brushed his lips to her temple and eased her away so that he might look upon her. Her lips trembled but she didn’t open her eyes. “Love is no’ a bargain to be traded in kind. It is given freely, as I give mine to ye.”

“Coll.”

Upon her lips, his name was a plea and a soft moan of denial. Tears wet her lashes. He kissed them away, first one then the other, then flattened her free hand over his heart.

“Dinnae fret for me, *mo ghrá*. I would sooner welcome a bayonet here than leave it barren of the joy I’ve kent wi’ ye.”

\* \* \*

The soft brush of Coll’s lips against hers sealed the vow and clung for a precious moment before he withdrew. She hadn’t been able to endure looking at him as he made his pledge; now she couldn’t bear not to. His chocolaty eyes shone in the sunlight, brimming with irrefutable lo— affection. Every word he spoke had pricked her heart until emotion bled out unstaunched.

He may have no reservations about risking his heart. But Ginny

continued to harbor enough for them both. His heart and hers. Coll didn't fully understand what they stood against yet. She did.

What had Prince Charlie said?

*You're saying it's going to be hell but there is nothing we can do to change it.*

Yes, that was it.

Parting from Coll again would be worse than walking through the fires of hell, true. On the other hand, he was right. She wouldn't take back a minute of the time she shared with him. Wouldn't regret it, whatever pain might come. Whatever piece of her soul she forfeited in the process was a price she was willing to pay. As Tris predicted, Coll felt the same. He was willing to risk his heart for her.

Fine, then. That was his choice. But she refused to let him risk his life.

Not for her. Or for the prince. Or for anyone.

That fiery resolve fizzled under the sweet brush of Coll's lips against her cheek, her jaw, then the corner of her mouth. A new flame sparked. One of rekindled passion and along with it, a reminder of how lonely the past two weeks had been for her. Two months for him.

What a terrible thought.

Ginny swept it away and focused on Coll. She could melt under the power of that smolder. Her lips tingled, anticipating his kiss. The scent of him—salty, yes, but also warm and musky—surrounded her. Beneath her hand, his heart pounded a rapid beat. His breath caressed her sensitive skin and a wavering sigh escaped her.

"Did ye miss me, lass?" His brogue was a husky whisper. Another quiver seized her as he drew a finger along the line of her jaw and down the side of her neck. "Have ye thought of me? Thought of this?"

A moan was the only response that found its way to her lips.

His fingers threaded through her hair, drawing her head back. Blood rushed to her head as his lips traced the line of her neck. His teeth raked her tender flesh, leaving her dizzy. "Have ye lain awake remembering that night? Och, I'd wager I recall every second as well as ye. Ye gave herself wi' such abandon, such passion. The verra thought of it fires my blood and leaves me aching for ye night after night."

Ginny trembled under the sensuality of his voice. He made love with his lips, with his words, and left her wanting with the merest touch.

"Tell me, lass. Tell me I am no' alone in this at least."

"Every day. Every minute," she choked out. A sob caught in her throat. She had yearned for him. Burned for him. He'd never been alone in what he felt. Crazy to believe she had been.

The confession unleashed his passion. His mouth covered hers,

devoured her. Helpless to fight him or herself, Ginny surrendered to his ardent kiss. Clinging to him, she parted her lips as his hands swept down her back and pressed her against the hard length of his body.

Let the fire rage.

“Whoa there now, folks!” They sprang apart and stared at the man, woman, and two preteen girls who stared back unabashed. The man tipped back his baseball cap and grinned. “This is supposed to be a family show, ain’t it? Not one of those dramas my wife watches?”

“I beg yer pardon?” Coll drew himself up, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword. He had no context to make sense of the interruption. From the way his gaze scoured the man—obviously an American tourist given his accent in addition to the worn denims and crisp, new Loch Ness Monster T-shirt under an equally new Columbia raincoat. Few European tourists dressed that way.

As her heartrate returned to normal and her senses returned, Ginny’s humor at the situation rose. What a sight they must be, she in her long tartan skirt and black bodice laced up over her ivory blouse and a braw, kilted Highlander, armed to the teeth. Both of them still damp, besides. The girls and the woman, too, ogled Coll as though he were something foreign and exotic. As if the Outer Hebrides were a zoo, and he, its main attraction. From the way the woman’s fingers twitched, she clearly wished it were a petting zoo.

No blame there.

Up the slope behind the foursome, more tourists dispersed in all directions from the central hub that was their tour bus. Many had noticed Coll and gravitated in their direction. Not at all the kind of introduction to the modern day any one deserved. It was time to go.

“We’re so sorry to offend young eyes,” Ginny assured the man, sweeping a hand down her gown as if to demonstrate the extent of their love affair with Scotland. “We were getting in the spirit of things and got carried away. It’s a gorgeous country, isn’t it?”

“It is.” The woman nodded emphatically and earned an exaggerated eyeroll from her spouse in return.

“We’ll leave you to it then.” Ginny took Coll’s hand and urged him to uproot himself from his wary stance. “Have a wonderful time.”

The man grimaced and called for his daughters to follow, which they did, albeit reluctantly. The woman, however, lingered. She caught Ginny’s eye and held up her phone. “Do you mind? Just one?”

“One what?” Coll scowled at the phone, unwittingly providing the exact image the woman was after.

She fanned herself with it when she was done and sighed. “Thank you. The girls in my book club would never believe me otherwise. When I first got here, I was so disappointed. I thought TV really misrepresented the scenery, if you know what I mean?”

"I do."

The woman cast one last appreciative glance at Coll and smiled at her. "You're so lucky."

"I know."

And she did.

\* \* \*

Coll gladly turned his back on the strange woman and the other people who dared to approach. They raised too many questions with their odd manner of dress and language that was even more unsavory than Ginny's had once been to his ear.

"What was that?" The question came of its own accord, despite the fact that he was quite certain he didn't want to know.

Ginny looped her arm through his and squeezed. "That's what's known across the globe as an ugly American," she told him with exaggerated confidence. "They are what you think of as Colonists, like me."

"They are nothing like ye, lass."

"I'll take that as a compliment." She grinned up at him and increased her pace. Coll matched it, eager to leave the peculiar folk behind.

It was obvious he did not appreciate being so rudely recalled to the unimaginable scenario she presented him with. Despite his skepticism, he now noticed the subtle differences beyond the more obvious indicators that he was in an alien world, such as those crude people or the shiny, boxlike structure they emerged from. The land was bisected by a road that hadn't been there before. In the distance, a pair of buildings, stark white with black roofs rose from the moor. Thin black lines connected the structure to a limbless tree, then to another and another as far as the eye could see. Beyond that, there was something in the air, a disconcerting hum unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

"I should apologize for how moody I've been. The way I reacted when I saw you at Nunton and back there, too," Her soft voice held a wealth of regret. "These past few weeks...everything since we met actually, it's been a lot."

"A lot of what?"

Her shoulders lifted with a huff of laughter. "A lot to take in. To process. Especially for someone prone to excessive amounts anxiety and overthinking." When she glanced up at him, a smile played at her lips. "Believe it or not, my everyday life isn't normally filled with intrigue, subterfuge, and death-defying escapes."

Coll welcomed the first burst of true humor to arise in months. "Truly? I'm consumed by astonishment."

With a sigh, Ginny's smile faded away. Resting her chin on his

shoulder, she stared up at him with a troubled brow. "Then to throw fuel on the fire, I dropped this whole thing on you without warning. It hasn't been well done of me."

He'd almost forgotten about the circumstances which had led him to this strange, otherworldly apparition. He refused to consider it part of his reality. Replaying events in his mind, he recalled Ginny telling him that soldiers were about to come upon them. He didn't anticipate the royalists would be a threat to them personally. While they seemed to revile all Scots at the moment, his plaid gave him away as a MacLeod, a clan known to have repudiated Prince Charlie's claim to the throne. A fact that had spared him conflict over the past two months of travel across his war-torn homeland.

On the other hand, the soldiers might question their presence in such an isolated area and think to launch a search. That would not do.

"We can always spend a little time here so you can look around," Ginny continued when he failed to respond. "We can find some food and talk."

While his hunger announced itself at the mention of food, the thought of passing a minute more with people such as those they'd just encountered turned his stomach. He needed time to consider her revelation.

Or simply endeavor to believe in his heart what he saw with his eyes.

Perhaps in time...

He groaned at the word. It would never hold the same meaning for him now.

"The bothy is this way." He steered her in the right direction. "Let us return to the prince."



## Chapter 35

*June 28, 1746*

Here was another of those occasions that made tap dancing her way through history worth the struggle. Ginny bit back a smile as Flora, Peggy, and Lady Clanranald fitted Prince Charlie in his Betty Burke disguise.

While there was little time to waste on frivolity, they had a reprieve as far as time was concerned. She and Coll had returned to 1746 only a few yards away from the bothy and early enough to witness past events as they played out. Watching himself leave the building to follow her as he had a half hour before had rendered Coll speechless and a little unsteady on his feet. Ginny sympathized with his plight. It had been a surreal experience for her the first time she'd come upon herself even when she expected it. She could only imagine how he felt and was proud of him for taking it so well.

He'd kept his shit together well enough to disarm another lone militiaman who'd been passing too close to the bothy upon their return. In fact, he'd seemed to enjoy the brief fight. While Coll bound their prisoner and hid him in another hut close by, she'd sprinted back the way they'd come and rewound time to lead the remaining soldiers on a futile chase in the opposite direction.

They needed to make haste and leave here as soon as possible. Though fraught with worry over what could go wrong, she was happy to indulge in a little fun.

Reading an account of this moment was nothing compared to having it acted out in real time. Over his breeches, Prince Charlie wore a beige quilted petticoat and calico gown. His expression as he suffered through the corset lacing was everything. Even more entertaining was the moue of his now rouged lips as they fitted a wig and lacy cap and bonnet upon his head. They added a voluminous mantle to further camouflage his manly shape.

Frankly, he looked so absurd, she couldn't imagine how this plan had ever proven successful.

"I feel a fool," he declared, stuffing his feet into suitable shoes. "And vulnerable besides. Should I not at least carry my pistol?"

Flora shook her head. "Oh no! Should we be stopped and searched and a weapon found, our farse will be discovered!"

"Miss MacDonald," the prince replied gravely. "Should we be so

thoroughly searched, I assure you it is a far different weapon that will give me away.”

Coll choked on a laugh. Ginny was glad to hear it. He'd been too quiet since their return. Not that she blamed him. His was a harsh introduction to the future.

“We should be on our way,” Burke said gruffly, though there was a hint of amusement on his lips too. “Our oarsmen will attract notice if they linger on the beach too long.”

“Aye, we should go,” Coll agreed with a solemn glance for Ginny. “Burke and I will attend ye, yer highness.”

“Coll, no.” It was bad enough he was here now.

MacEachine shook his head. “Nay, the foundation for this plan was that Flora carries travel papers that allow her to travel. They indicate only one manservant and one maid accompany her. Any more will draw unwanted attention.”

“We will blend in among the oarsmen,” Coll pointed out. “If someone does question us, I've permission under the head of Clan MacLeod's name to travel freely.”

Ginny wasn't sure if it was the truth or not, given his estrangement with his father, but he sold it with a straight face.

“What of her?” Peggy pointed at Ginny with a pout. Clearly she'd noticed Coll's attention had strayed. Ginny took heart in the fact that the young woman seemed more put out than heartbroken.

“Shush, Peggy,” her mother admonished. “Let the men talk.”

“Ginny will accompany us.” Coll's tone was firm.

Again, MacEachine protested. “Nay, we cannae have a second woman amongst us.”

The prince tapped his lip thoughtfully, the affectation ridiculous in his female garb. “As I have disguised myself as a female perhaps she could take on a man's garb.”

Another option struck Ginny. “I have an idea—”

“Tis no' the worst idea,” Burke offered. “Nae one will look too close, aye? If they do, she'll be the least of our worries.”

“I have anoth—”

“Nay,” O'Neill cut in. “The lass is too wee to pass as an oarsman.”

Ginny cleared her throat. “There is another way—”

“If she kept low in the boat, no one would see her I suppose,” Prince Charlie said.

“Excuse me.” Ginny stood amid the men and held up her hands. “Will you please allow me to speak rather than talk over me as if I haven't anything of value to offer? It's rude.”

Not only that, it was insulting and almost as repugnant as Lady Clanranald's admonition to “let the men talk.”

While the others gaped at her, Coll spoke up, “She is here to help,

aye? Let her have her say.”

“Yes,” Prince Charlie agreed as if he’d supported the position all along. “That is my thought exactly. As always, Miss Hughes’s insight is invaluable. What have you to say?”

“Thank you,” she offered, more to Coll than the prince. “Once we cross the Minch safely, your highness will no longer be in need of additional protection. We will pull to shore at some point”—on the western point of Skye’s Waternish Peninsula after rowing blind in the rain along the way, according to her research—“and then acquire a second boat. We can split up. MacLeod, Burke, and I in one while you carry on in the other to Kilmuir and escape Skye overland from there.”

Thus peeling the two men in the most danger away from the source.

The prince tapped his lip again with a thoughtful frown. The other men awaited his opinion, except Coll who’d always proven himself supportive of her ideas. “Aye, sounds a solid plan. I can don yer tartan, yer highness. If we depart ahead of ye, we can act as decoys and draw any attention away from ye.”

Ginny blinked. “What? No!”

Such a mad plan could be exactly what got Coll and Burke killed.

“Aye,” Coll insisted.

Burke nodded his agreement. “Aye, ’tis a sound strategy.”

“No!” No one heeded her protest this time.

“A noble deed.” Prince Charlie gave his stamp of approval. “And an excellent idea.

They proceeded to gather their belongings. She grabbed Coll’s arm and forced him to look at her. “You cannot do this, Coll.”

He chuckled her chin with a faint smile. “I ken ye have reason to believe ye ken what is to come, lass. I am master of my own fate, nevertheless. After seeing what the prince has endured, I cannae stand idly by when it is in my power to do more.”

Denial raged through her. “I told you, you could be killed.”

“I am prepared for that eventuality.”

She was most emphatically *not* prepared.

“What about Mr. Burke?” she asked, grasping at straws. “You cannot make that decision for him when he is unaware of the risk.”

A solid weight fell on her shoulder. She turned to find Burke there offering her a sympathetic smile. “Dinnae fash, lass. ’Twill nae come to that. If it does, ’tis as the prince said in Arisaig, come what may, we are all accepting we may die.”

“If I remember correctly, and I assure you I do, you disagreed with him then,” she pointed out. “And I’m adamantly disagreeing with you now. You can’t do this.”

They were doing it anyway. Come what may.

Ginny huddled on the bottom of the boat near the bow stubbornly refusing to sit next to Coll on the first bench. It was too late to turn back time and undo this madness. She'd land herself in the middle of the Minch and likely be dragged under by the weight of her skirt, no matter how strong a swimmer she might be. Her only option now was to let it play out with fingers crossed. True, if the worst happened, she could backtrack and rewind. That didn't mean she wanted to watch Coll and Burke die.

Then there was the one factor she kept locked in the recesses of her mind ever since she'd almost been captured near Ormaclett Castle. If a dead woman couldn't push a button, a dead woman couldn't rewrite history. With each passing day, the stakes had risen. The danger increased. For the prince. For Coll and Burke. And for herself.

She didn't care to dwell overmuch on the possibility, but this manhunt could be the end of them all. Ginny had never felt so helpless. What was she but a plague on this time? Her guts were tied in knots of stress and seasickness.

She glanced up at Coll. With a rifle on his lap, he remained alert, eyes scanning the black horizon as he rowed. Burke and MacEachine were somewhere in the back of the boat. O'Neill had stayed behind to escort Lady Clanranald and Peggy back to Nunton overland. On the bench behind Coll, Prince Charlie cradled Flora's head in his lap while she slept beside him and protected her from being trampled by the sailors as they trimmed the sail.

"The wind has come to our rescue, at last," Prince Charlie said. "Rest easy, MacLeod, whilst you can."

Coll secured his oar with a nod and set his rifle aside. Slipping off the seat, he leaned back against the side of the boat and pillowed his head with his rolled up jacket. Staring fixedly at the cloudy sky, Ginny could feel his eyes on her.

"Will ye no' speak wi' me, lass?"

"Can I change your mind?" she shot back.

"Nay."

The simple denial so calmly spoken, wrenched at the worry in her gut. She shouldn't stress it. If worse came to worse undeniably, did she really want to spend their time holding a grudge?

With a sigh, she inched over until she was by his side and rested her cheek against his chest. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kissed the top of her head. "Better."

Yes, it was better. As always, his presence calmed her fears and eased her thoughts. With him beside her, the constant reel of tragic scenarios for the hours ahead faded from her mind until there was only him.

For a while neither of them spoke. As he had on his first crossing months ago, Prince Charlie sang to keep spirits high. He had a nice voice. One well-suited to the task. The boat hit a swell, lifting them as if they were on a roller coaster. Her stomach rolled along with it. She hadn't eaten with the others. Thinking something in her stomach might help, she dug into her bags and sorted through the snacks she'd bundled into a cloth napkin. Choosing two granola bars, she offered one to Coll.

"How is it ye always have a food wi' ye?" he asked, examining the treat. "Is yer bag magic as well?"

It was the first reference he'd made to her revelation.

"No, it's a plain, old tote," she told him. "I'm rather notorious for getting hangry if I don't eat regularly." He lifted a quizzical brow and she explained, "A combination of angry and hungry. Testy would be a better word. Anyway, I tend to carry something for emergencies to stave off the feeling."

"Thank ye." He took a bite and his eyes widened. Chewing slowly, he savored it before swallowing. "'Tis far tastier than an oatcake. Dare I ask what it is?"

"Oats, nuts, honey, and chocolate." She took a bite, too, and immediately rejected the anticipated benefit to the stability of her stomach. She offered it to Coll. "Would you like another? I noticed you didn't eat much earlier."

He ate it, then another from her stash. They shared her thermos of iced coffee without further comment before he drew her back into his embrace. Nevertheless, the turmoil of his thoughts was a palpable thing. At least he understood the peril they were in.

"Ye mentioned something about being captured by the royalist militia earlier," he said sometime later. "How did that come to be?"

Ginny told him about her attempts and failures to locate Flora in Cleagorry. "Instead of getting farther each time, things only got worse. There was this moment of *déjà vu* when they caught me. It was just like the day we first met without the romance," she tried to make light of it. "I was tied up and thrown over this soldier's shoulder. You should have been there. Instead of being tossed across a horse, I was dropped in the bottom of a boat a lot like this one."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Puir lass, ye maun have been terrified."

"I was," she admitted. "I had no idea where they were taking me. They spoke only in Gaelic. I don't know if they understood me or not. Though I suppose they must have, since they gagged me. By the time I could free my hands, I had no idea where I was. It took me a long time to find my way back."

"Burke told me that ye've attracted the notice of the local militia

in yer search for the prince.” There was a hint of admonishment in his voice, along with a touch of concern. “I gather, despite yer reprimand when I made the suggestion, ye do deem jeopardizing yer welfare a fair recompense to assure the prince’s safety.”

Nicely boxed in by logic, Ginny gave him the point. “Touché. Though in my defense, while I searched for the prince, I was actually looking for you and Burke.”

“To save us.” It was not a question. “Because ye ken what the future holds.”

“I have a general overview of events involving the prince. As for you personally, there were few details as to how it will play out.”

“Because ye gained yer knowledge from books. History books.” Again, not a question. He’d somehow made the connection already. “I thought once before the breadth of yer knowledge was akin to history books. I cannae say that I like how that suspicion was confirmed.”

The uncertainty in his voice made her chest ache. “I’m sorry you found out the way you did.”

“As am I.” His sigh brushed her hair. “I feel I should be angry wi’ ye for lying to me for so long. Or I should continue to harbor some anger for the way ye left me. Any anger at all instead of this bugged quandary that plagues my mind. I dinnae want to accept what ye said or what I saw. And that a mere taste of it. ’Tis madness to think it possible. Worse to bear any curiosity for what lay beyond what I witnessed.”

As anger was supposed to come after denial, not before it, in the stages of acceptance, Ginny couldn’t determine how he was truly handling it. She opted for offering her support. “I’m sorry I’ve made such a mess of things. For you, especially. I’m here for you when you want to talk about it.”

“I’d rather hear more about the more immediate future. What will come of the prince?”

The heartbeat of silence it took for her to consider her answer revealed more than she imagined.

“Is it so terrible then?” His brogue grew raspy, wary. “I feel like ye said something long ago on the matter. Something about me wasting my time. All this time, have I?”

He was tense now beneath her cheek, his breath shallow, bated by dread. She wished there was something she could offer him. Some positive on the fact sheet of negatives. “I should never have been so cruel. Your devotion to Prince Charlie and to Scotland is one of the things I love most about you.”

Ginny bit her tongue at the admission, wondering at how easily it had rolled off her tongue. Coll didn’t seem to have registered the slip.

“Ye said it was treason, what we’ve done,” he recalled. “If that is

how history writes events, our cause maun have been futile indeed. A Stuart king will never regain the throne, will he?"

She glanced up at Prince Charlie to assure he wasn't listening. She'd made plenty of mistakes, but she wouldn't be responsible for altering his mindset at this point. Who knew what could go awry in the days ahead if he lost the faith that had driven him this far.

"He won't. I'm sorry, Coll." Tilting her head back to look at Coll, she ran her thumb across his clenched jaw.

His chest vibrated with the force of his shaky exhale. "Tell me more. The truth, however unsavory, if ye please."

"It will take almost three months more for the prince to escape Scotland and return to France. Once he does, he will never return," she told him quietly as if she could soften the verbal blow. "There will never be another war waged in his name. Your countrymen who become members of the English Parliament will not fight for Scotland as one might imagine they would. Robert Burns—well, he's just a baby now, but one day he will become a great Scottish poet—he wrote that those men were "bought and sold for English gold." I'm sorry, Coll. I remember you spoke of wanting Scotland to retain some measure of independence as a part of Great Britain. Sadly, even in my time that hasn't happened yet."

"Yer time." His throat closed around the word. "How long?"

"Close to three hundred years."

"Three hundred...?" He drew back and gawked at her. His expression was awash with astonishment. She imagined he might thrust her away from him as if she were something alien and abhorrent. Instead, he clasped her so tight it was difficult to breathe, as if she were an anchor in the storm raging through his mind. "I cannae comprehend such an expanse of years. Centuries. Eons. 'Tis..." He closed his eyes and lifted his face skyward. His head turned in denial. "Impossible. 'Tis far easier to look back over such an amount of time wi' the knowledge of all that came in between than imagine the unknown."

"If it helps, I feel the same. Picturing how it will be centuries beyond mine"—according to Donell, abysmal—"must be like you imagining man walking on the moon."

He flinched then groaned. "Och, say nae more. I dinnae want to ken."

Compassion prompted her to comply with his request. Everything he'd already imagined for his future was unraveling with each word she spoke. There was no reason to burden him with concepts far more impossible than that of reinvigorating the Jacobite rebellion.

"Does what I told you change your mind about playing a role in securing Prince Charlie's safety now?"

For all that must be ravaging his mind, there was no delay in his answer. “Nay, even if he will have a change of heart and abandon all hope of regaining the throne, he dinnae deserve to die at English hands. He is in need of assistance and I will continue to provide it.”

He thumped his head back against the hull of the boat and stared skyward. “Och, lass. All that ye’ve revealed—and I ken there is far more—how am I to move forward from here? It has been my life’s mission to see a Stuart restored to the English throne. I’ve given all I have toward that end. Now to discover it has all been for naught? Where do I go from here?”

“That’s easy.” Ginny snuggled close to him. “You find a new mission.”



## Chapter 36

*The coast of the Waternish Peninsula, Isle of Skye, Scotland*  
*The next morning*

“They’re firing upon us,” Coll ground out as he hauled on the oars to propel their rowboat away from the shore.

“Gee, I can’t imagine why, *your highness!*” Ginny grabbed the tail end of the Stuart tartan he wore and waved it in his face. “I told you this was a bad idea.”

“Save yer naysaying, lassie,” Burke ground out as he loaded gunpowder and musket balls into the barrels of the four rifles they carried and rammed them down. “In the bottom of the boat wi’ ye, lass. And keep yer head down. Ye’ll live longer.”

“It’s definitely my preference.” She dropped down as low as she could praying no one got hit.

After leaving the others in a cove on the Waternish Peninsula as expected, the three of them departed in a smaller rowboat they’d bought from a local fisherman in Halistra. They’d barely passed the hooked end of the headland before a pair of sentries on the cliffside spotted them and shouted for them to pull to shore. When they ignored the command, as many as fifteen more men joined the pair and began to fire upon them.

Every damned one of them sported the MacLeod tartan.

She hadn’t seen *that* coming.

“Those are your clansmen?” She looked from Coll to the men on the cliffside. “Why don’t we surrender then and tell them who you are?”

“How would I explain this tartan?” he asked. “Nay, I cannae risk exposing the prince.”

A bullet whizzed over Ginny’s head and embedded itself in the opposite side of the boat with a spray of splinters. She jumped with a yelp. Adrenaline sent her heart rate skyrocketing and pumped hot blood past her frazzled nerves and straight to her head. It pounded like thunder until she couldn’t hear herself think. Whatever opposition she’d faced before in her search for the prince, she’d never been shot at. It really drove home how deadly this venture had become.

“Bloody Cormac!”

“Bloody what?” she shouted at Coll as another volley came from the shore.

“Cormac,” he growled. “Tis my bloody brother trying to kill us.”

“He always was a good shot,” Burke grumbled. “Magnus is up there, too.”

“Aye, I see him.”

A stream of profanities such as she’d never heard from Coll since she tried to break his nose were drowned out by a third round of shots. Burke fired back. A half-hearted effort in Ginny’s opinion, given it hit the cliffside far below the mens’ position.

“Really?” She scowled at him. “Do I need to be the one to actually shoot some shit so we can get out of this in one piece?”

Burke shrugged as if he hadn’t a care in the world. “I cannae shoot the lad’s kinsmen, lass.”

“Oh, but we can let them shoot us?”

“Dinnae fash, lassie. We’re nearly out of range.”

Nearly counted for nothing in Ginny’s book. He was right, though. With Coll’s might behind the oars, the next round splashed in the water behind them. The band of MacLeods disappeared from view, likely to find a boat and chase them down.

Burke assured her of the impossibility before she could bring it up. “The water is too low for them to launch off such a rough shore. Once we’re beyond those rocks ahead, they will no’ be able to see us.”

“What of the prince?” she asked. Ugh, she didn’t want to hit rewind and do this again. Ever. “Those men will be on alert now. We may have robbed Prince Charlie of a clean getaway. They could be captured or sho—”

“Ye’re overthinking again, lass,” Coll said.

“And you’re not thinking hard enough.”

“They will have time enough to pass by.”

Ginny watched the point fade into the distance as they turned south. Loch Dunvegan lie to the east and Dunchleach Castle about five miles or so down the coast. The summer sun shone in the clear blue morning sky now that the fog had been burned off warming her. Removing her damp bodice, she draped it over the seat to dry and spread out her skirts to do the same. The splash of the oars in the water and gentle breeze soothed her frayed nerves. She focused on making her brain do the same. There was still so much that could go wrong.

*Because of me. Because I’m here.*

*Let it go, girl.*

With that inner admonishment, she sought a distraction. She’d never before visited the Isle of Skye. The countryside around them was breathtaking. Undulating moors covered in emerald grass sandwiched between the brilliant blue sky and deeper blue water. She leaned back and rested her elbows against the side of the boat to

watch it as they passed by. Another, more breathtaking sight ensnared her attention, however. Watching Coll work the oars was like watching an erotic ballet. His forearms strained below his turned up sleeves and bare legs braced on the hull as he rowed. The sun glinted off his tawny hair and sparkled in his eyes. While pleasurable, the sight was anything but relaxing. It amazed her how his presence could be so comforting one moment and so tantalizing the next.

It also amazed her that he could look so vital after a thirty-mile trip across the Minch when she felt damp and crusty and exhausted from bailing when a squall kicked up halfway through. She probably looked like the stuff of nightmares and, given how much time she'd spent hanging over the side of the boat heaving her guts out, she probably didn't smell so good either.

He took notice of her perusal and a knowing smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "Take over, will ye, Burke?"

Coll stood and stepped aside, rocking the boat as he traded places with the other man. While Burke took his turn at the oar, Coll shed Prince Charlie's easily recognizable red plaid. Her heart sped up again as his thighs were bared below the hem of his shirt. So thickly muscled they might have been sculpted in stone. Her fingers itched to touch him.

Unaware of the direction her thoughts had taken from admiration to lustful appreciation, he grinned down at her as he pleated his kilt around his hips and belted it. "Ye have to admit, as far as diversions go, it worked."

That brought her most of the way back to earth.

"You're an idiot." Rolling her eyes, she shook her head. "Your own family just tried to kill you and you're making jokes? You know, when you said your clan didn't support Prince Charlie's cause, I don't think you were as forthcoming as you could have been."

"Does yer own family always see eye to eye?"

"Of course not."

He nodded at her reluctance to answer the question. "Aye, and how often do ye care to admit how great a rift exists? Dinnae forget, I recall how disconcerted ye were to admit ye've been a disappointment to yer father."

"Point taken." Ginny stared down the lakeshore, tension rebuilding for the conflict that awaited them. "So how bad will your welcome be? Do you expect more of the same?"

Following her gaze, his lips flattening. "'Tis difficult to say. When last I saw my brother after the battle—Hamish, no' the one who shot at us—he was returning home. I dinnae ken if he was turned away or no'. I hivnae received a message from my mother since long before that. Then only to encourage me to abandon the Jacobites, and for the

sake of peace between us, follow my father's example."

"As a patriot to the crown rather than to his own country?"

He shot her a sad smile. "I thought ye said I was a criminal?"

"You're a patriot," she assured him. "You should know by now not to pay any attention to what I say when I'm angry or terrified."

The remorse in his eyes was washed away by a flash of mischief. Shooting Burke a sideward glance, Coll squatted down next to her and took her hand with a wicked smile. "How about what ye say when ye're on the brink of ecstasy?" he murmured for her ears only and kissed first her hand then the inside of her wrist.

Ginny shuddered, her blood raced hot once more. "You mean all that swearing?"

"No' the first time," he corrected. "I refer to the second."

With a frown, she scoured her memory of that night. She recalled no words beyond the sensual murmur of Gaelic from his own lips. Every moment was crystal clear. His kiss. His mouth everywhere. Her overwhelming response to his touch. The fire that spread through her. The play of his body against hers. Skin against skin. The sweet coil of passion in her belly before she'd come apart. Ginny released a slow trembling breath, her head abuzz with arousal born from the mere memory.

Coll's breath hitched. He pressed his lips to the palm of her hand then to her cheek. "'Twas my intention to toy wi' ye a tad," he whispered hot in her ear. Another shiver ran through her as he touched her ankle—through her stocking, for crying out loud. Heat blossomed between her thighs. "Och, lass. Yer passion destroys me. I can feel it running through ye. Were Burke not here, I would toss up yer skirts and taste yer sweet quim."

"Sweet Jesus," she moaned at the imagery his words provoked. As if he'd flipped a switch inside of her, she was throbbing with desperate need. Every bit of her tingled with anticipation for something that wasn't going to even happen. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, fighting back the urge to allow him to do as he liked regardless of their audience.

"*Mo ghrá.*" It was a long groan of surrender, echoing the moment he'd come inside of her. "Should the worst come to pass, I will die wi' the regret that I wisnae given the chance to lay wi' ye again."

"I would hate that, too."

"Enough of that now," Burke said. "I see the prince's party behind us."

Pressing a kiss to her lips, Coll pulled away. Gnawing on her lips to will the sting away, Ginny swiveled around to see for herself. "I guess six oarsmen are better than one."

"Aye." Coll nodded. "It will be a matter of minutes before we

meet.”

He rotated around, surveying the area around them. A shadow passed over his face, a despondency she had only seen a few times before. She followed his line of sight and a pang shot through her chest.

“Is that Dunchleach?”

Obviously it was. She asked only as a means to discover what he was thinking.

“Aye.” His tone bespoke his yearning. He said no more.

“What do you miss most of home?”

A huff of laughter lifted his shoulders. “Food. Good food and plenty of it, aye Burke?”

“Aye,” was Burke’s heartfelt reply.

Coll’s smile was tinged with sadness as he looked up at the stronghold. “I lost at least a stone or more over the past year. My mother may no’ recognize me.”

“I doubt that.”

The castle...no, his family home sat perched on the shore of the loch nestled in the crook of a small harbor. It sprang from a jutting, craggy basalt base and rose in a series of creamy, squared towers against a backdrop of verdant hills beyond. It was no fairy tale palace. Over the past five hundred years, it had known war and peace with modifications and additions to support both circumstances. In this time, it was missing the tallest tower she’d seen in pictures. It was no less imposing for the absence.

In her time, Dunchleach was one of the oldest continually held castles in Scotland with eight hundred years of MacLeod’s residing in its walls, including the current leader of the clan. It was also one of the biggest tourist attractions on Skye. Over forty thousand acres of forested land, fields, and pleasure gardens.

In this time, it was a symbol of the might of the Clan MacLeod. Disconnected from the mainland by a wide moat, it wasn’t even accessible by land yet, and wouldn’t be for years to come until the need for such fortifications diminished and the recess was filled.

It looked ready for battle. From the look on Coll’s face, he expected one.

Ginny took his fisted hand and smoothed down his fingers until she could interlace them with her own. He glanced at her with a faint smile. “The moment isnae upon us yet, lass. We first maun see to the prince’s safe journey to Kilmuir ’ere I face this particular war.”

“I dinnae believe we have a chance for Kilmuir, lad.”

Burke let the boat drift and pointed down the loch. In the distance, the English flag flew from the mast of a frigate with a half dozen small vessels bobbing in the water around it.

Both men turned to her. Ginny could only shake her head. "I don't know."

"Ginny?" Coll bent close to her again, this time his mien far more serious than the last. Seeing plainly she had no idea what was happening, he swept his fingers through his hair with a grimace. "I suppose the details of a retreat after such a devastating loss isnae considered significant in the annals of history?"

Especially if that was the end of the war.

"Everything I've read basically said that Prince Charlie escaped from Benbecula and landed in Kilmuir, then on from there on foot across the Trotternish Peninsula to Portree then Raasay and..." She let the thought trail away when his expression of puzzlement turned to a frown. "What?"

"Dunchleach isnae on Trotternish, lass."

Her brows spasmed in time with a minute jerk of her head. "What do you mean? You said Kilmuir is just down the coast."

"Feck it all," he swore turning to Burke with a clenched jaw. "When she mentioned Kilmuir at the bothy, I assumed she meant this Kilmuir."

"*This* Kilmuir?" she repeated over Burke's chorus of profanities. "What do you mean by that?"

"There's another Kilmuir north of Loch Snizort," he bit out. "On Trotternish."

Ginny's mind rebelled at the revelation. Her stomach clenched. "No, you don't get to have two towns with the same name. It makes no sense. Otherwise, all of this..." She circled her hand between them. "Is for nothing."

He ran both hands over his head then scrubbed his face with an aggrieved moan. "Bugger it, we're in..."

"The wrong place," she finished for him. Ginny buried her face in her hands. She'd done it again. Messed up history and jeopardized everything. Shit, her very presence had become a blight upon this time. She didn't even want to consider what more she could do to screw it up.

Coll drew her hands away and lifted her chin with one finger until she met his eye. "Dinnae fash, lass. We'll make it through."

"How?"

He glanced over his shoulder, gauging the prince's approach and then back at the ships. "They are putting on full sail. Mayhap they intend to depart and leave the way clear. We can follow at a distance and escort Prince Charlie to the other Kilmuir."

"Aye," Burke spat. "And what are the odds of them sailing past us wi' a smile on their faces?"

"I mean they could, right?" she said. "That's the whole point of

the prince's disguise."

Whether he passed inspection or not, the entire timeline had been skewed by their deviation. As things stood, there was no guarantee that Prince Charlie would ever make it off Skye in one piece. Mentally she tabulated the long list of steps required to get her back to a point on Benbecula where she could make a course correction. Most notably, the need for solid ground beneath her feet.

Coll's bark of laughter bared his feelings on the matter. "I confess, this plan of MacEachine's to disguise him as a lass never seemed sound to me. From a distance, aye. On closer inspection...?" He trailed off with a shake of his head.

She wanted to assure him that history had proven the costume effective. In this particular situation, it wasn't a sure thing given that everything she touched turned to ash. Ginny looked around, waiting for Donell to appear and berate her for making yet another mistake.

"Best no' take the chance," Burke said as the prince's boat pulled alongside them.

Flora was clinging to the prince's arm, her features taut with apprehension. Prince Charlie didn't look pleased either. "This is an unexpected development."

"I believe they're making sail wi' the intent of departing," Coll assured him. "As we are between them and the only outlet, that means they will come this way."

"Then we must seek refuge before they do," the prince echoed Burke's opinion.

Coll nodded. "Aye, but where?"

Everyone looked meaningfully at the harbor to their left and the massive castle perched on the shore. Ginny could almost hear Coll's teeth grind. "Nay, yer highness, ye willnae find sympathy wi'in those walls. It is as Auld MacLeod explained back in Arisaig, not all of the chieftains of Skye support ye."

"Aye," the elder MacLeod grunted and spat in the water. "The lad's right."

"It is either face detection by those on the oncoming vessels or risk it within those walls," the prince said. "I fancy neither, nevertheless I prefer the option that allows me a fair chance to flee on foot if necessary."

Without waiting for further input, he directed his oarsmen to steer them into the harbor. With an apologetic glance at Coll, Burke turned the rowboat to follow. The spit of land that encircled the cove would block them from view of the ships.

"I'd like to think we could simply rest here until the ships have passed," Coll said grimly. "Alas, nae one lands at Dunchleach wi'out my father taking notice. Best we face him head on and pray he disnae

see through the prince's disguise.”

Ginny grimaced. They didn't need a mere prayer. They needed the whole freakin' Bible.



## Chapter 37

*Dunchleach Castle, Isle of Skye, Scotland  
Late June 1746*

“Behold, my prodigal son returns.”

They’d hardly managed to tie the boats to the dock behind his father’s *birlinn* before the crunch of gravel announced Tormond MacLeod’s presence on the path beyond. Inwardly Coll flinched at the wealth of derision in the words. Outwardly, he managed to display an air of composure he did not feel.

“I dinnae ken ye read from the Bible, Father.” He straightened and looked his sire in the eye measuring the changes the last year had wrought. A bit more gray threaded his dark hair, no more. Tormond was still the embodiment of power. “If I recall the parable well enough, the prodigal son isnae scorned on his return, but welcomed wi’ celebration.”

“Are ye admitting ye were lost and are now found?”

Coll’s gaze flicked to the pair of guards who lingered farther along the path and back to his sire. “Is such an admission required for me to step foot in my home?”

His father grunted and left it at that. Nothing more. No acceptance or denial, greeting or rebuttal. Nothing like any of the welcomes he’d imagined over the past year. Aye, it could have been far worse, he knew. Alas, it could have been much better as well. It was a splinter to his heart that his sire’s affections as well as the state of his welcome remained uncertain.

Tormond turned to the rest of Coll’s party. “Who have ye wi’ ye?”

Turning, Coll winced at the sight of Prince Charlie climbing from the boat displaying an inelegant amount of leg for the woman he was supposed to portray. He directed his father’s attention to Flora first as the highest-ranking member of their party. “Ye may recall Miss Flora MacDonald, Father. She’s the stepdaughter of the MacDonald of Amandale.”

Tormond accepted her outstretched hand and kissed it, thankfully taking no notice of her pallid complexion. “Aye, we met a number of years ago in Edinburgh, I believe. A pleasure to see ye again, Miss MacDonald.”

“Thank you, my lord. I hope you will forgive our unexpected intrusion.” She batted her lashes and squeezed his hand with enough

strained flirtation to keep his attention focused on her while the prince arranged his skirts to his satisfaction. "May I also present my friend, Miss Ginny Hughes."

Ginny made a good show of mimicking Flora's tone and posture as she greeted him. She'd bravely managed to put her worries aside and for the first time, her brogue was convincing enough to waylay any criticism. "It is a pleasure to meet you, sir."

"And ye as well."

Tormond looked past her to the other men who attempted to casually shield the prince from view. Before Coll could distract him, Ginny tucked her arm through his father's and after a pointed look, Flora took his other arm. Ginny steered him toward the castle and smiled up at him brightly. "Would you mind greatly if we take the opportunity to refresh ourselves? I fear we were caught in the rain on our journey and are all rather worse for the wear."

"Naturally." Not one to directly contradict a lady's request, Tormond snapped his fingers at his guards. "I'll have yer servants and oarsmen shown to the servants hall."

The two women traded wide-eyed glances before Flora spoke up. "Perhaps Betty, my maid, could attend me for a moment first before I meet Lady MacLeod?" When he didn't immediately respond, she added. "I should hate to look affright when I first meet Coll's mother."

Tormond glanced back at Coll over his shoulder with clear speculation in his dark eyes.

And something bordering on approval.

The implication of Flora seeking his mother's approval was as obvious to Coll as it was to his father. On one hand, it was a move well played. It provided both reason and justification for his unannounced return. Should his parents believe that he'd spent the last two months courting the daughter of a well-respected government supporter like her stepfather rather than skulking about avoiding the royalist militia, all the better for him and the success of their mission.

On the other hand, the same was a repugnant farce. True, he'd considered returning with a bride in hand to pave the path to acceptance. A brief lapse in judgment born of his grief over Ginny's disappearance and a desperate need to find some solace among those he loved. Upon reflection, he had no wish to gain Tormond's approval through such disingenuous means and live out the remainder of his days feigning regret he did not feel.

He needed his father to accept what he'd done and face either his forgiveness or continued contempt hereafter. The sooner he explained those terms, the better off he would be.

It would be a delicate balance to disabuse him of the notion with the stepdaughter of an outwardly avowed Hanoverian on hand and no

other rational justification of her presence or reason to explain why they traveled together. If Tormond suspected that he continued to support the Jacobite cause, he may think to reconsider the impetus behind Coll's return.

Or look too closely.

Och, he wouldn't have to look too closely. The prince's impersonation of womanhood left much to be desired. Not only was he taller than most ladies, his long, manly stride would easily draw comment.

And he did.

"Tis an odd muckle lass, that maid of yers," Tormond said to Flora.

"She's Irish," she answered as if it were explanation enough.

Apparently it was. His father grunted his acceptance and continued toward the gate with a lady on each arm. Coll was glad to have Tormond's sharp eyes directed as far from Prince Charlie as possible. He fell back until he was closer to the prince who walked between Burke and MacEachine, each taking their jabs to remind him of his role.

"For God's sake, sir," MacEachine grumbled. "Please take of what ye're doing or ye will see us all dangle from the end of a rope."

They climbed the steep, walled path that hugged the rock face and led to the single iron gate in the easterly curtain wall. As narrow as it was, they were forced into a single file. With his father's guards behind them, there was no turning back. Once they passed through the gate, the stone walls rose at least twenty feet on either side of them, lessening in height along the incline, then steps that led to the ramparts above.

Despite the manner in which Ginny sighed and exclaimed over the magnificence of it all, Coll had always found the tight entrance daunting. Unwelcoming.

Never more than it was now.

"Och, we would have been better off facing a government armada," he muttered under his breath.

His companions were led away by the guards toward the service entrance, leaving only himself to stand between the prince and the dozens of royalist militiamen who were dispersed around the courtyard.

"Relax. Dinnae call attention to yerself. "

"Allow me the leeway for a prayer for deliverance," Prince Charlie said as they passed by the soldiers between them and the main entrance of the castle. Appropriately daunted, he hunched his shoulders and minced his steps.

His prayer was answered. Few paid them any mind, and those

who did followed the tidy figures of Flora and Ginny with their eyes rather than inspecting the remainder of the group. A few of them recognized Coll, lifting a hand or calling his name. He returned the greetings as naturally as he could.

This had been a terrible idea.

And like most terrible ideas, they always went from bad to worse.

\* \* \*

This was a bad idea bordering on a suicide mission. Ginny could see that now as they walked through the gauntlet to the castle doors. With a pair of guards behind them and too many before them to retain any level of optimism, the only chance they had was to keep their heads down and create as few ripples as possible.

She played the part of awed visitor, gushing over the beauty of the castle.

It wasn't difficult. If the view of the loch from the ramparts hadn't taken her breath away, her first step inside the castle would have done the trick. The entrance was a wider, more welcoming version of the walled passageway from the sea gate. Here the space was far less claustrophobic. Wide spaced stone walls covered in tapestries and framed portraits and landscapes soared three stories high. At the center, a wide staircase of polished wood with carved bannisters stretched up to a landing where an imposing set of double doors awaited them.

Climbing the stairs gave her chills. The castle was no climate-controlled museum with a library-like hush. Living history seeped into her, thrilling and daunting at the same time. The aura oozed with ghostly emotion of the centuries. Ginny imagined she could feel it all. All the tragedy and fury of the clan wars. The joy and heartache of generations of MacLeods. It enveloped her. Embraced her.

She inhaled slowly, willing the demonstrative rush of tears to fade. Then a giggle caught in her throat as one particular portrait at the landing above caught her eye. Three wee lads in adorable miniature kilts and tams on their golden curls stood around a pretty little girl at the center. One of the boys had a glint in his eyes she knew all too well. Peeking over her shoulder, she caught Coll's eye and cocked her head toward the portrait with a grin.

"You are so adorable," she mouthed. He rolled his eyes heavenward and allowed a small smile in return.

"I see ye've noticed the portrait of my children," Coll's father spoke having also noticed her smile. He gestured around the hall. "There are others. My eldest son Cormac there and my daughter Margaret there. Those two blank spaces used to house portraits of my other two sons." His inflection soured. "I have yet to decide if they will be reinstated along with the others."

Her heart sank. The manner in which Tormond greeted Coll on the beach had left a lot to be desired. This was a purposeful twist of the knife. Coll deserved better than to be disowned.

"Have they ceased being your sons, my lord?" she couldn't help but ask.

They reached the head of the staircase. He drew away until her arm fell from his. For the first time she saw Coll reflected in his features. In his scowl and the way he fairly exuded irritation. It reminded her of the day she and Coll had met and his irascible need to hear only what he wanted to hear. Like father, like son.

"Ye're a pert one. Ye will gain nae favors by challenging me when ye ken nothing of what was said wi'in these walls."

"I know enough."

"Ginny," Coll groaned. "Dinnae."

Tormond's teeth ground together audibly and color rose to his cheeks. "Then ye ken my sons disobeyed me and acted against my wishes."

"From another perspective, one could say they held true to the ideals of fidelity and integrity *you* instilled in them." Although the words rang with staunch conviction, she managed to keep her tone pleasant.

"They betrayed me."

Even if Coll had proven himself a disappointment in this man's eyes, she couldn't stand by and watch a parent disappoint his child in turn. Not again. The thought sent her temper raging. She'd taken so much lying down. It was time to stand up.

"And so you betray them in turn? As a father, you should be proud of them for acting on their beliefs against all odds." It was a struggle to express the words reasonably when she longed to scream at the top of her lungs against his obstinacy. She shook off Coll's arm when he reached out to stop her. "In their defiance, your sons have proven themselves to be men of stalwart moral fortitude willing to sacrifice all that they are in the name of honor."

Veins bulged on Tormond's temples as he glowered at her. Refusing to be cowed, she stared right back.

"Ye will no' speak to me in such a manner in my own home," he thundered.

"I think someone needs to. Politics has no place in family."

"Ginny," Coll took her arm again. "Enough, lass. It disnae matter."

Her brows shot up. "Of course it matters. You have survived a horrible, bloody battle and returned home in one piece. He should be welcoming you with open arms, not giving you this stoic prodigal son bullsh—"

He cocked a brow at her and she bit her lip. He didn't have to say

it. She'd gone too far. She spun away, fists clenching and unclenching to calm herself. Ugh, the past year had been worse by leaps and bounds for him than it had for her. He'd suffered through things she could only imagine. Yet, there was common ground between them. Enough that she'd projected some of her own issues onto his.

She jumped as the doors were thrown open. A majestic blonde in crimson, flocked silk stood there frowning down upon her. "What is causing such a commotion out... he—" Her hand flew to her throat when she saw Coll. "Cailin, you're home."

"He's nae home," Tormond protested. "He's come only to share some news wi' us 'ere he's on his way."

The woman glared at him. "Will you drive him away as you did Hamish? Will you again deny me—"

Tormond cut her off with a wave of his hand. "Enough. I willnae air our troubles to all who care to listen. Coll, inside." He swept an arm toward the open door, then grimaced at the remainder of them. "Miss MacDonald? And..." The invitation descended into a grumble of discontent.

"Mother." Coll took a step forward then an immediate step back.

Even in her riled state, Ginny could feel the sudden tension radiate from him. His body was taut. Coiled and ready to spring. His eyes were narrowed, fixed on a point beyond them. She turned to look and froze as well.

A small army awaited them inside.

## Chapter 38

“Allow the ladies to retire wi’ their maid,” Coll requested as evenly as their precarious plight allowed. “A word alone wouldnae be amiss before they rejoin us.”

“Of course, darling.” His mother’s hands grasped his before Tormond could reply. Her eyes were dewy with emotion, embodying the welcome he’d long hoped to receive. Much to his regret, Coll couldn’t spare a second to revel in it, not while lives hung in the balance. She squeezed his hands then nodded at Flora with a polite smile. “Miss MacDonald, I believe we met in Edinburgh last season. How good to see you again.”

Flora bobbed a wide-eyed curtsy. “You as well, ma’am. Thank you.”

His mother turned to Ginny. “And who is this?”

“Miss Ginny Hughes, Mother,” Coll introduced her and fell under his mother’s speculative eye. Her brow rose as if she heard something more in his words. He cleared his throat and added, “A friend of Miss MacDonald’s.”

“Naturally. Welcome, Miss Hughes.”

“Ginn—rather, Miss Hughes, may I introduce my mother, Lady Janet MacLeod.”

“A pleasure, ma’am.”

A regiment of militiamen behind, another before him with his sire and mother in between. Men may be able to gloss over a maid’s manly appearance without comment. His sharp-eyed mother was far less likely to overlook the obvious clues. It was an impossible bind they’d gotten themselves into with no obvious way out. He should have adamantly declined to entertain this wayward plan and refused to step one foot off the boat. If only life offered one the option to rethink their decisions....

Coll’s mind rewound at the thought.

Life did have that option.

Ginny.

The taut swirl of his gut recalled those seconds following their timely evasion of the two soldiers on Benbecula. There was a chance to make a different choice.

If only he could figure out how to introduce such a plan to the one person who could set it in motion.

All he needed was a word alone with her.

“Perhaps I should escort them to the Green Room before I join ye,” he offered.

“Nonsense, Roderick will see to them,” his mother insisted, referring to their steward who hovered near the drawing room door. She turned back to Flora. “Ring the bell when you’re ready and someone will come to escort you down. Your maid...”

“Betty, ma’am.”

“Betty then. She can join the staff in the kitchen afterward for a meal.”

Her gaze drifted to the prince and Coll stepped between them. “I’d feel better if—”

“No arguments now.” Janet took his hand and tugged him into the drawing room. “Come, sit and talk with me.”

There was nothing he could say or do that wouldn’t rouse suspicion. Under any other circumstances, he would send the women off knowing they were in good hands with Roderick. To imply other now or to appear unnerved by their departure would only draw speculation. With no other choice, he nodded his approval at Ginny and watched the door close between them as if it were a seal upon their doom.

“I’m so happy you’ve returned to Dunchleach, Cailin,” his mother said. “I have missed you dearly.”

“I’ve missed ye as well.”

He had. Thus, he allowed his mother to lead him to a pair of chairs near the open window. A cool breeze ruffled his hair but did nothing to soothe his growing disquiet as he counted heads in the room. His father must have been conferring with the commanders of the local government militias to warrant the number of men present.

Janet marked the shift in his attention. “Tormond, perhaps you can adjourn until later in the day?”

His father responded with a gruff negative only to be stared down by his wife until he gave in with little grace and dismissed the assembled men.

His mother clasped Coll’s hand once the room cleared. “I can only imagine your discomfort, darling, after the turn against Prince Charles Edward’s favor this spring. Rest assured, no one here is aware of your defection from the MacLeod’s oath to King George. You have nothing to fear. Does he, husband?”

Even Tormond’s noncommittal grunt couldn’t relieve Coll of the grim premonition that he had everything to fear. Perhaps his wellbeing was not in jeopardy at the moment. That could change in the blink of an eye should Prince Charlie be exposed. Any association with him would make them traitors in the eyes of the law.

Of all the possible homecomings he’d envisioned, this was the



worst.

"Tell me what brings you here," Janet said then shook her head. "No, the reason does not signify. I'm simply glad you're home."

"He's no' staying," Tormond protested. "He isnae welcome here, especially after what that lass had the temerity to say to me."

A burst of fury fired Coll's blood that Ginny's passionate defense had done nothing to shift his father's opinion. Contrarily it had altered his perspective a great deal. He couldn't dwell on it now when greater woes vied for his attention. He strained to hear the activity beyond this room. The battle within meant little when weighed against what could happen without. All hell could break loose while he was trapped behind these doors.

Janet's keen gaze slid from husband to son. "I am curious about the ladies." She held up a hand to forestall his impending defense. "No, not about what was said, rather the ladies themselves. Tell me about this Miss Hughes."

His father stomped across the room and poured himself a glass of whisky. "I'll no' hear a word in her favor. The other one, however... Aye, I'll give ye credit there, Coll. If ye meant to regain my good graces, a display of loyalty to the crown is a fine way to go about it."

"What is this?" Janet asked.

Unable to sit any longer, Coll moved to the window and looked down on the courtyard below. Was it his imagination or had the numbers swelled?

Tormond lifted his glass in Coll's direction with a hint of satisfaction. "I gather yer son has decided to take a bride, wife. Under the circumstances, he couldnae have chosen a better one than Flora MacDonald."

"Flora?" Janet blinked in surprise and met Coll's eye with open skepticism. "When we met Miss MacDonald last season—or was it the season before?—you did not seem particularly taken with her. Cailin?"

"What?"

"What does it matter if he was taken wi' her?" his father retorted. "While her choice in companions is questionable, Flora MacDonald comes from a good family. Their unquestionable loyalty to the crown should suffice to expunge any of the rumors that have been levelled against Cailin's loyalties. Hamish could learn something from his example."

That drew Coll's full attention as nothing else could. There it was. The hint that all may be forgiven if he provided a demonstration of his penitence. A wee lie from his lips now and a lesser sin to repent later when Flora jilted him for the betrothed she already had in hand. It would be so simple. Harmless.

And provide an excuse to make their visit a brief one so that he might escort her “home” again.

Despite the benefits, he couldn’t bring himself to acknowledge his father’s assumption. Whatever benefit it gained him, it grated on him to grovel in any manner.

Or to deny the truth of where his heart lie.

However rash her exposition was, Ginny had a point. Bugger it all, he didn’t truly expect to be welcomed by his father with revels, nevertheless he’d been taught upon Tormond’s knee to put his country above all else. It was for Scotland alone that he gave all.

“Ye’ve mistaken the situation,” he said solemnly as he faced his sire. “I will no’ bend a knee to gain yer favor or plead for yer forgiveness for I’ve done naught I regret. Furthermore, I believe Ginny was correct in her assessment. The love I harbor for Scotland and the honor that compelled me to do everything in my power to regain our country’s independence was instilled in me by ye.”

“Now see here—”

“Nay,” he interrupted. “I ken that the time for war is past. I ken there will never be another chance to change Scotland’s inclusion in this so-called Great Britain. Nevertheless, I cannae twist my fidelity to serve the King of England as ye have, putting coin and land above the best interests of my countrymen. I may no’ be able to raise a sword to fight any longer, but I can raise my voice in Parliament. I can promise my vote will never be ‘bought and sold for English gold.’”

Ever since Ginny had said those words, they had been vexing him, gnawing at his gut. Amid his duty to aid in the prince’s escape, he’d almost forgotten what had driven him to advance the Jacobite cause in the first place. It wasn’t a person he fought for, it was the future of a nation, its people, and a way of life. Defeat on the battlefield did nothing to defeat his hopes for Scotland or his vision for the future.

She’d suggested he find a new mission.

In that moment, Coll did exactly that.

Or was it the same mission upon a new field of battle? It mattered naught.

Tormond appeared on the verge of apoplexy. His mother simply stared up at him in wide-eyed shock over his proclamation. No reason not to pour fuel on the fire.

“And it isnae Flora I plan to wed.”

Janet recovered herself. “I imagine not. Allan MacDonald would have something to say on the matter.”

“Aye.” He reached out and squeezed his mother’s hand when she graced him with a soft, supportive smile. “’Tis Ginny I hope to have as my wife.”

His father sputtered in disbelief. “That insolent...”

“Brave, loyal, bonny lass who leapt to my defense only to say what I should have myself, ye mean?” Coll finished for him. “Aye, her. I love her. All the more because of how she spoke up rather than despite it.”

“Brava, my son.” Janet beamed up at him. “I cannot wait to know her better and welcome you both home.”

Tormond found his tongue. “Ye think after the way he spoke to me, he will be welcome here?”

“I should hope no’, Father.”

Coll spun on his heel to see his older brother and cousin at the door. It was an hour’s ride overland on horseback from Halistra. His fingers itched to retrieve his watch and mark the hour. They must have made good time from where he’d had last seen them.

“Cormac, ye’re supposed to be standing watch,” Tormond berated the elder son.

“I was.” Coll tensed as his brother inspected him from head to toe with open derision. “I couldnae help but rush home when Magnus insisted it was my brother we saw pass by this morning after being gone for so long.”

Their cousin Magnus, a brute of a man with bushy black hair and beard, mimicked Cormac’s inspection. “Did ye stop to change, Coll?”

Magnus knew. He bloody well knew what he had seen. Cormac appeared more speculative. Then again, his myopic eyesight may have given him pause.

The question was: Had they lingered long enough to see enough to put it all together?

“I dinnae ken what ye mean, Magnus.”

“He means ye’re wearing the colors of Clan MacLeod,” Cormac answered for him.

Coll touched the length of blue and green tartan wool secured over his shoulder and did his best to look puzzled. “Aye, as I do on a daily basis.”

“What are you playing at, Cormac?” Janet rose and stood between them.

A surly smile curved his brother’s mouth. “Ye’ll see shortly, Mother, once the search is complete.”

Trepidation clenched at Coll’s gut. “What search?”

\* \* \*

“I wish I had never let my stepfather talk me into this,” Flora cried as the steward closed the bedchamber door behind them. “He made it sound as if I would be a heroine in some gothic novel. Now we may never get out of this alive. Worse, if we’re caught, Allan will never forgive me.”

There could be an argument about which of the two points was

worse than the other. Ginny was in no mood to point that out. If Prince Charlie came out of this alive, Flora would emerge smelling like roses. A true folklore heroine.

*If, if, if.*

Ginny raced to the door and peeked out to make certain that that Roderick guy had truly left.

Flora paced, wringing her hands. "I'm on pins and needles wondering what's going on down there."

Ginny was too, however returning to the drawing room was something she wanted to avoid at all costs. She'd made a fool of herself laying into Coll's father like that. No doubt, he'd have her carted out and dumped on the figurative front steps if he saw her again. She also had no desire to watch Coll pass off Flora as his betrothed. She'd caught Flora's subtle hint down at the beach. While it was an excellent maneuver to waylay Tormond MacLeod's suspicions, one mistaken fiancée had been enough for her.

Besides, returning to the drawing room would mean their "maid" would be sent to the kitchen alone. Granted Burke, MacEachine, and others were down there somewhere, but a lot could happen between point A and point B.

Adjusting her bag across her shoulder, she patted it seeking assurance that nothing had been done that couldn't be undone.

A knock at the door made them all jump.

It was only a housemaid bringing water and a steaming pot of tea. She offered her assistance. Flora declined for them, almost unable to contain her panic. She wasn't cut out for this subterfuge any better than Ginny was.

Prince Charlie lifted the lid off the teapot with a wrinkle of his nose. "Tea. Pity that."

Lifting his skirts, he pulled a flask from the pocket tied around his waist. He drank and paced the room while Ginny followed Flora's example, washing her face and hands and tidying her hair just in case they were forced to make an appearance downstairs. The cool water did nothing to calm her nerves.

Nor was she soothed by the décor of the room. The pale green velvet brocade wall covering inlaid with gilded fauna swirls begged to be petted but did nothing to mellow her mood. Shit, it could damn well purr and it wouldn't do the trick. Nerves on edge, she went to the window and peered out over the loch. The ships they'd spotted were passing by in a majestic display of the misfortune that could have been theirs had they kept to the boats. Even that seemed preferable to their current predicament. If only they'd had a parasol for the prince to twirl over his head while they passed they wouldn't be in even more dire straits now. She'd seen the way Janet MacLeod looked at

“Betty Burke.” Coll’s mother was no one’s fool. If she’d seen through the disguise, at this very minute, Coll could be under guard while they summoned the soldiers to search for the prince.

“We’ve got to get out of here.”

Prince Charlie ceased his pacing. “What?”

“If someone comes looking for us, we’re in the worst possible position,” she told him. “There’s only one door and a sheer drop from the window down to the courtyard below.”

He joined her at the window and looked down with a twist of his lips. “I agree. Remaining here would allow us no recourse. What options do we have? As we entered, I noted a trench that appears to disconnect the castle from the mainland. If that is the case, the sea gate may be the only way in or out. I do not believe we three alone could pass by those soldiers without comment.”

Ginny couldn’t fault his logic. “So we find another exit?”

He drummed his fingers on the windowsill. “There are also the men we saw in the drawing room to consider. One would suspect they have been dismissed in order for lord and lady to converse privately with their son. This eventuality provides us no indication of where they’ve been relocated to, whether it is above stairs or below. We must therefore presume that any movement of ours through any reception rooms may be easily detected. Can you not see what is to come?”

Ginny shook her head. “Honestly, I’ve got nothing...to offer that might benefit us,” she corrected her lapse into modern language. “Do you have any ideas?”

He studied the scene below. “I believe you’re right. Our only option is to seek out the possibility of an escape route beyond the gate. Given what I observed of the exterior, I would speculate we are not in the oldest part of the castle. The design of those machicolations on the adjacent tower”—he leaned close to the window and pointed—“tell me it dates to perhaps the thirteenth or fourteenth century and is the original keep. The curtain wall would have been constructed at the same time. See the well there near the stairs to the gate? I imagine this portion of the castle stands on what was originally the bailey. A dungeon most likely lies below.”

And rarely were there ways out of dungeons. Ginny pictured the castle as she’d seen it from the outside. “How do you know all that?”

He raised a haughty royal brow. “I have studied of the art of war regardless of what some may believe. What are castles other than a strong defense? The original castle was a stronghold. Now the small tower to the east likely dates to a century or two later.” His fingers tapped out a rhythm then stopped. “That is our best chance.”

He’d thought of something.

“What is it?”

“There may have been a chapel there. If it dates back to the era I believe, it may have a priest’s hole.”

“A priest’s hole?”

Flora joined them at the window. “A place where Catholic priests would hide during searches.”

Ginny had never heard of anything like that mentioned on a castle tour, but who was she going to believe? A castle tour guide, or a guy who’d lived in one?

“Yes.” Prince Charlie’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction. “A good papist would never be without a way to avoid a protestant inquiry.”

“They’re wee crannies to hide a man or two in,” Flora argued, “typically with no way out.”

“Not always. Furthermore, I may not require an escape route *per se*,” he argued. “What I need is a means to remain undetected. Without evidence to the contrary—namely my person—there will be no reason for any of you to be suspected of aiding and abetting my escape. Once they are convinced of your innocence, you can retrieve me and thus make our getaway.”

A sacrifice play to allow them plausible deniability. So, Prince Charlie had the ability to strategize after all.

“What if it takes days to get away?” Flora protested. “You could starve.”

“So many have suffered for my safety,” he said. “It is only right that I suffer for theirs.”

Ginny shook her head in amazement. “You don’t get all the credit you deserve, your highness.”

“I should say not.”

## Chapter 39

"We're done for," Flora gasped through her fingers that were pressed against her lips as footfall pounded on the servants' stairs below them.

"Shush now, we are not."

Ginny gave her a nudge and they backtracked up the spiral staircase and exited a half-turn back at landing they'd passed. They closed the door to the stairwell and huddled into the niche of an arrow slit. Prince Charlie appeared equally unnerved by the immediacy of the threat.

"I'm afraid I am forced to agree with Miss MacDonald," Prince Charlie said as he craned his neck to look through the opening. "MacLeod was correct in his assessment of taking refuge here. I can feel the portent of doom upon us."

"That's just the midge bites itching. I told you not to scratch them."

Despite her words, Ginny inwardly agreed with the prince. She felt like a sitting duck.

The niche they were in was one of many along a long, narrow balcony between the level with the bedchambers above and the one below where the drawing room was and the dining hall the balcony overlooked. The room bustled with activity with numerous servants arranging elaborate place settings, silver, and crystal on the draped table. Their presence denied them the extreme option to jump. The only ways out were the door behind them and another at the far end. Hopefully, no one would burst through either door. She had no desire to test her catlike ability to land safely.

"What is this?"

"A piper's gallery," the prince told her as the echo of footsteps in the stairwell faded.

He leaned over the balustrade and ducked back again when a group of men raced through the dining room. All wearing a familiar blue and green kilt. They must have been the men who'd spotted them earlier from the cliff.

That meant Coll's brother Cormac had recognized him and they were searching for the prince.

*Relax, girl, there's no reason to panic.*

No, the proof of any wrongdoing on Coll's part was right beside her. Unless the royal Stuart tartan was found in their boat to provide

additional evidence. Hopefully Cormac's insight wasn't as sharp as his eyesight. Either way, the kilt needed to be retrieved and hidden. Even with the power to bend time, there was no guarantee that any of them would be able to depart the castle without a sentry spotting them. Even in the dead of night.

Flora was right. They were done for.

"There is a passage on the far end of the dining hall that should connect to the adjacent wing," Prince Charlie murmured. "The door on the farther end of the gallery could descend to that point. You ladies should return to the drawing room to allay suspicion whilst I carry on alone."

She and Flora protested in unison.

"Hear me out. Unless my disguise has been discovered thus my identity exposed, there is no reason to believe my presence verified," he said. "Should she return to the others, Miss MacDonald may play the part of the royalist everyone believes her to be. She could express her astonishment that anyone believe otherwise."

Although unnerved by their current circumstances, Flora had been chosen for her role for a reason. "Yes, yes. How could anyone possibly believe *I* would be a part of such treasonous activity?"

Such a performance would be beneficial, however it wasn't going to solve the whole problem.

"Flora should go, but I'm staying with you, your highness." Dismissing his protest, Ginny turned to Flora. "If anyone asks about me or Betty here, tell them our stomachs didn't agree with the crossing and that we're resting."

"Only a partial untruth," the prince added, aware that they both felt the same about water travel.

Ginny watched Flora depart, noting how her shoulders squared before she opened the door. She would be fine. The prince and she had some work to do before the same could be said of them.

"Those men who came through haven't come back this way," she realized. "There must be another way out."

"Let's go."

\* \* \*

"One must appreciate the depth of their righteous indignation," Prince Charlie whispered as they reached the servants' hall two flights below only to find Burke and the others being questioned by a pair of militiamen. "Should Miss MacDonald fare so well, we have naught to fear."

While duty had driven most of them to safeguard the prince, Ginny would be willing to wager that, like her, it was simple affection that motivated them now. Prince Charlie, while often a pompous ass, was also, quite simply, a likeable human being. He wouldn't have



gotten so far raising the funds to finance his cause or in convincing the Highland chieftains to commit their men to fight for it if he hadn't been.

Unfortunately, charming their way out of the present situation wasn't an option.

"Where to now?"

"As there was no exit in the stairwell between the piper's gallery and the hall, there must be another way for the servants to deliver food to the dining hall," he said. "The kitchen should be below the hall. We should try there."

Ginny tried to picture the path they'd taken and where it would lead without success. She really did have a terrible sense of direction. Should she be required to reenact these events, she would Google a floorplan first.

The door to the piper's gallery above opened and panic again sent her heart racing. "We've got to go. Now. Walk, walk," she hissed as he hurried from the stairwell. "Remember, they're looking for a prince, not a servant."

Straightening his cap and wig, he strolled casually behind the backs of the soldiers. On wooden legs, Ginny followed, certain this madness would be the end of them. Burke spotted them, his eyes wide and face flushed in stark contrast to his gray beard. He rolled his eyes to express his disbelief, then pinned his gaze to the floor before anyone else took notice. They were at the other end of the room when more guards poured out of the staircase they'd abandoned. Her head spun madly and she released a whoosh of breath, unaware that she'd been holding it.

That had been too close. Luckily, Prince Charlie's sense of direction was solid. There was a staircase in the corner of the butler's pantry. The savory scent of fresh salmon followed them as they climbed. Ginny's mouth watered even while her clenched stomach revolted. They emerged in a passage immediately beyond the dining room. They followed the short hall in the opposite direction and found themselves in a small room of whitewashed plaster that looked nothing like a chapel.

"Through there."

The prince led the way through a wooden door to the next chamber. This one was paneled in dark wood from floor to ceiling with a huge circular candelabra of black iron at its center hanging on a thick chain. A round table with a few chairs around it was positioned on one side of the room with a pair of chairs placed near the single window on the opposite side facing the loch. Peering through it, she noted the activity of militia below. The search was still on and her heart continued to pound.

Cardio was good for the heart. Cardio through terror and anxiety could kill a girl.

She watched the prince as he circled the room, stopping every few feet to stomp on the woven rug that covered the wood floor. "What are you doing?"

He stomped again. "Searching for the priest's hole. I could use your assistance. Look for an opening in the panels."

Ginny did as he bade with skepticism. Running her fingers along the raised trim between the paneled sections, she prayed for a miracle though a latch of some sort would do. Blood pounded in her head harder than the prince's foot hit the floor. When deep breaths did nothing to ease her nerves, she tried for distraction.

"This doesn't look like a chapel."

*Thump, thump.* "What use do you imagine it was?" *Thump.*

"A card room?" She knocked on each panel hoping for a hollow echo. Then poked and tweaked the shaft of wheat carved into the center of the molding. "Maybe a reading room given the shelves there and the books lying around."

*Thump.*

"Hmm, look there."

Following his finger, she studied the tapestry that hung next to the door. A depiction of forest and wildlife and men armed with bows in deep brown and blues. "It isn't exactly religious in theme."

"Not the tapestry. Here." He pointed to a vaguely darker patch of paneling that protruded from behind the wall hanging then pulled the cloth back to reveal the faint shape of a cross. "The sun coming through the windows faded the wood around a crucifix."

She couldn't help but be impressed. She'd had a predetermined impression of the prince prior to their meeting that he was steadily eroding. Perhaps she could convince Coll to write a memoir to remind history of his attributes instead of focusing on his flaws.

Thinking of Coll roused thoughts and feelings that had no place in their current situation so she pushed them aside and kept searching along the wall for a hidden priest hole. *Knock, knock, knock.* Nothing. The fireplace surround jutted from the westerly wall. It was a piece that announced itself with authority. Each side was over a foot wide with the rounded relief of a half column curving outward. Otherwise, it was a minimalist design of flat panels edged with a raised trim. Smooth plains of wood arched over the empty hearth. Only a cluster of pastoral carvings centered below the mantel marred the simplicity of the design and caught her attention. She twisted and prodded the relief to no avail. A strand of hair tickled her cheek. Pushing it away, she continued her search.

A shout sounded in the distance.

*Thump, thunk. THUNK.*

“Stop,” Ginny hissed running for the door. “Someone’s coming.”

“I think I’ve found it.” He flung back the rug.

Slipping out the door toward the passage, she peeked her head around the corner. The soldiers had returned. Instead of rushing through the dining room, they now took their time looking behind drapery and inside cabinets. They were methodically working their way in her direction.

Alarm chilled her veins, she hurried back to the chapel to find Prince Charlie prying open a trap door. It would have been too much to hope for a set of stairs. There was only the tiny space Flora predicted.

“They’re coming this way.”

He flicked his hand. “Come, there’s space for us both to hide.”

Maybe, but... “There’s no way to cover it with the rug if I do,” she whispered. “You get in.”

“And how will you explain your presence here?”

Ginny scrambled for a solution and came up empty. “Damn, I can’t believe there’s only one way in and out of this place. What if there was a fire? It makes zero sense.”

She could hear voices. They were getting closer. Something had to be done. An idea took shape. A crazy one. She reached into her bag and withdrew the time travel device. Waking it, she checked the time.

“Get in, your highness.”

“I cannot leave you—”

“I’m coming, too. Make room.”

There was no more time to argue. The soldiers were almost to the passage. Without another word, the prince dropped down into the hole and plastered himself one side to make room for Ginny. She sat on the floor then slipped in beside him, pulling the trap door shut behind her.

“What about the rug?”

“It won’t matter. I only need another second.”

Footsteps rang close by. The next chamber. She tensed and gripped the mechanism. “Uh, would you close your eyes, your highness?”

“What? Why?”

“To say a prayer for us,” she whispered.

Another footfall...then a muffled shout. “Here. I think I’ve found him.”

Ginny ran her thumb around the glowing circle.

“Hail Mary...”

Yes, it was exactly that.



## Chapter 40

“Well?”

Tormond barked the word at Cormac when he returned to the drawing room, not only empty-handed, but in a fit of temper. “Magnus is still searching.”

Coll allowed himself a healthy dose of relief. “Did I no’ say this accusation of yers was pure madness?”

Cormac turned to him with fire in his eyes then stomped across the room and tossed his pistol down on the sideboard. He poured himself a healthy dram and tossed it back before deigning to look at Coll again. “Magnus says he saw ye in that boat. Dressed in the Stuart colors wi’ a man and a woman. For all I couldnae understand it, I trust him.”

That assuredness had prompted his brother to race back to the castle on horseback rather than take to the water in pursuit. He’d always been hotheaded even as a lad. Had his temperament been more even-keeled, Cormac—even with his nearsightedness—would have witnessed the passing of the second vessel bearing the true prince. As it was, a single witness and that error allowed for a measure of doubt Coll was happy to exploit.

“I arrived here wi’ two ladies in my party along wi’ two servants and six oarsmen including our kinsman Donald MacLeod and Sir Alexander MacDonald’s man, Edmund Burke. Both men loyal to the crown, as Father can attest,” he said. “Magnus’s eyes deceived him, brother.”

Whether his father believed one son over the other, Coll wasn’t certain. What he did know was that Tormond would never let it be said that a traitor had been harbored at Dunchleach, even without his knowledge.

Cormac would not concede the point. He trusted the man who’d stayed home and fought at his side, not the brother who he felt betrayed him. Father and son shared that feeling. Likewise, Coll didn’t blame him for refusing to back down, given that Magnus had seen correctly. “I ken what I saw. Ye maun had changed yer clothing along the way.”

Flora spoke up, peering over the rim of her teacup with visible indignation. “Are you suggesting that I would allow a gentleman to disrobe in my presence?”

Cormac ground his teeth, unwilling to give voice to his opinion.

Much to their advantage, Flora and Ginny were both brunettes, their clothing of similar color if not pattern. It would have been difficult to differentiate between the two, especially since Ginny had faced away most of the time or been crouching to avoid being shot. Were the crux of his alibi not hanging in the balance, Coll would gladly beat his brother to a pulp for endangering her.

"Come, Cormac," Janet implored calmly. "Set this nonsense aside and welcome your brother home properly."

"He's no' home," Tormond repeated yet again. "He's no' staying."

His father's stubbornness was the only part of his homecoming that corresponded to the one he'd imagined. There was a reason Coll had questioned his welcome. In that alone, he was not disappointed.

"Cailin will stay for luncheon," Janet declared in a manner even her inflexible husband would not dare refute.

Undoubtedly, she would have her way eventually and insist Coll be allowed to stay. Would he want to, considering the hostility he'd been met with thus far? Would being home be enough to make it bearable? Coll wasn't certain.

"If Miss Hughes is up to joining us, I will join ye," he agreed for his mother's sake only.

He should have known any words that left his mouth would only serve to needle his brother who'd yet to concede the loss.

"Speaking of this Miss Hughes, did ye no' say she and yer maid were resting?" Cormac asked Flora. "The bedchamber was empty."

"I imagine so," Janet said in tranquil tones. "Miss Hughes, the poor dear."

"Puir dear?" Tormond echoed. "The lass is a harridan."

"If her sensibilities are as upset as Miss MacDonald said, I imagine her outburst was born from distress. If she's not abed, she's probably gone for a stroll around the ramparts to get some fresh air with the maid to chaperone her, as would be expected."

"She was quite overset," Flora agreed. "As was poor Betty. The fresh air will do them good."

It chafed Coll's instincts to let Ginny's safety lie within the strength of a few words. He longed to take action, to do *something* to free them all from this tangled web. His fingers itched to free his sword from its sheath and rid Dunchleach of its every threat. Instead, he sat on his hands doing nothing. The knowledge that it was his best course of action in that moment did nothing to placate him.

"Dinnae fash about the women. Focus on the prince," Tormond barked. "If Charles Edward Stuart has set foot in this castle, he needs to be found. Quietly. Did ye search the cellars?"

"Aye," Cormac bit out.

"The old kitchen? The priest's hole?"

Flora's spoon rattled against the saucer she held. Coll caught her eye and saw the flash of alarm there. His momentary respite ended with an apprehensive knot in his gut.

Though her explanation that Ginny and Betty suffered from lingering seasickness and would not be joining them had been presented to his parents with convincing sincerity, her solitary return to the drawing room had been disconcerting to say the least. Her affront over the suggestion that the Stuart prince could in any way be connected to the daughter of the commander of the government militia had assured him that Ginny and the prince were aware of the search, at least, and taking measures to evade capture. It had also pacified his father even as it enraged his brother and their kinsman into joining the search for themselves.

After Cormac and Magnus left the room, she'd offered a few more comments regarding the insult to herself and to her family's reputation before settling in to serenely share a cup of tea with Janet.

Coll hadn't a moment to ask her about the whereabouts of Ginny and the prince.

At least now he knew where she expected them to be.

"Aye!" Cormac stormed much to Coll's satisfaction. "He wisnae there."

"How about the dungeons or—"

"Aye, my men have searched everywhere and questioned the men who arrived wi' Coll," Cormac told him. "There is nae sign of the prince. Nor have I located Miss MacDonald's friend and maid. It's as though they've disappeared."

Where, Coll wondered.

Or when?

\* \* \*

There were two things Ginny hated about horror movies. First, that the women always screamed and screamed and then screamed some more at the sight of blood, dead bodies, and whatever nightmarish figure chased them through the woods, be it Jason or Freddy or Chucky. The men never screamed. She found it insulting to her gender.

Only slightly less annoying was the fact that people always came out of hiding too soon only to come face to face with danger seconds later.

This was her first real life experience to contemplate what the appropriate amount of time should be. With little time to spare, she'd pushed Prince Charlie and herself ahead fifteen minutes in a flash of light. A second ago the air had been filled with the thunder of footsteps and shouts of alarm.

Now, all was quiet and pitch black in the cramped space.

“Have they gone so quickly?” the prince whispered. “I’d feared we’d been discovered. My stomach churns at the thought.”

They *had*.

They could be again.

Holding her lifesaving gadget at the ready, she stared blindly up at the wooden planks fearing the worst. Minutes ticked by with only the muted call of gulls to break the silence. Her panic ebbed then sprang to life again. When someone began to relax, that was always when the villain sprang out wielding a chainsaw or decapitated them with a machete.

“I believe they’ve gone,” Prince Charlie said. “You must be a witch after all, Miss Hughes.”

“Don’t worry, I only use my powers for good.” He tensed and Ginny groped in the darkness to pat his arm. “It’s a jest, your highness. It was nothing but luck.”

“Then you should make the most of it and make your retreat while you can.”

Or jump ahead a few hours? Back? She pondered the possibility of rewinding to a point in time prior to their arrival at the castle and whether she and the prince could stroll out of the fortified walls without being questioned by the soldiers in the courtyard. Or future residents. Or tour guides. At what point past or present would it be feasible? Any?

Dunchleach for all its historic glory was beginning to feel like a certain musical hotel in California. They could check in, but they could never check out.

They couldn’t lie here indefinitely either. Flora knew they sought the priest’s hole and would pass that information on to Coll, who may or may not know where it was located. On the other hand, if news spread that their hiding place had been found empty, he may never think to check it again.

She would have to leave and find out what was going on.

“I’m opening it.” Ginny didn’t argue as the prince groped for the latch in the darkness and released it. He pushed with little effect, then pushed again. “They must have replaced the rug.”

That would also explain why it was so dark.

“Help me push.”

Together they managed to lift it far enough for her to skinny through and shimmy out from under the rug.

“Shut the door and replace the rug,” he commanded. “I will wait for you to retrieve me.”

She wanted to rebut the royal order. Deep down, she couldn’t think of another option. “I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

“You have not failed me yet, Miss Hughes. I don’t believe you’ll



begin now.”

Bolstered by his faith, Ginny straightened the rug. Departing through the adjoining chamber, she plotted her route to the drawing room. Those plans went to ruin as a series of servants poured into the passage through the door to the butler’s pantry below. Beyond, she could hear conversation and the clink of metal against china. Lunch was being served.

Cursing under her breath, she retreated the way she’d come. She was almost there when the hall cleared and she had a clear view to the opposite end of the dining room.

And they had a clear view of her.

At the foot of the table, Janet MacLeod cocked her head and looked right at her. Noticing her distraction, Coll followed her gaze. His eyes flared when he spotted Ginny. Then Flora did the same with a soft gasp.

“Shit.” Afraid the chain reaction wouldn’t stop there, Ginny hurried back to the chapel. Easy enough for her to hide in time. If they thought to search the priest’s hole again, the prince would be found.

She paced by the fireplace, impatiently brushing back the lock of hair that blew against her cheek. How could she get them out of here once and for...?

Her steps slowed and she retraced them to the fireplace. A breeze as soft as a baby’s breath kissed her cheek and lifted the fine hairs there. Hope shot through her. Her fingertips traced the carvings at the center of the massive surround. As before, nothing moved or depressed under her examination. Still, there was definitely air flow. Stepping into the cavernous hearth, she pushed against the stone.

Here.

There.

Nothing.

Pulling out her phone, she activated the flashlight and swept the light over the cavity from left, to the back, to the right and up. Frowning, she turned to the front and ran the light over the inside of the opening.

Her breath caught. “Please be a secret door. Please be a secret door.” She pushed on a small piece of stone that angled away from the others. There was a soft snick and a rush of air that stirred her skirts.

Nothing more.

With a frown, she poked it again then ducked out of the hearth only to find that the front columned panel of the surround now stood open a few inches. “Yeah!”

Coll’s voice bounced through the next room. “I’m telling ye, ye’re seeing ghosts, brother.”

Cursing under her breath, Ginny scrambled for the time machine. Instead of jumping forward this time, she circled back. She only needed a few more minutes.

A flash of white, Ginny almost squealed as she saw herself crawl out from under the rug like a zombie rising from the grave. Once the old her was out the door, she reopened the portal she'd just found and peeked inside. Satisfied that it was at least big enough to accommodate two people if nothing else, she excavated the prince from his resting place.

"What are you doing?" he protested.

"I found a way out. Hurry. They'll be here any second."

Without wasting time on questions, he clambered out. They repositioned the rug again before they stepped through the opening and pulled it shut behind them. There were footsteps. Prince Charlie stilled, believing there were soldiers in the room. Ginny didn't panic... yet. It was only herself searching for the lever she'd discovered. The door popped open.

Her eureka moment.

Ginny pulled the door closed again as Coll entered the room with his brother.

"Och, yer head's mince, brother," he was saying. "I'll allow Magnus saw a man in a red plaid wi' a man and a woman wi'out question if ye'll allow for the possibility that it wisnae me. Ye cannae mistake two vessels for one. Eleven persons for three. Faithful Hanoverians among them, I might add."

"In the name of feck, stop yer havoring."

There was a *thunk* and another curse as the priest's hole was thrown open.

Ginny sensed Coll's relief as if he stood right next to her.

"There, are ye satisfied?" he said. "Ye ken as well as I there's nae other way out of this tower. Even yer nae such a glaikit that ye can believe a person could appear or disappear before yer verra eyes, aye? Pax, Cormac. Were we no' once friends as well as brothers?"

"Aye, we were before ye and Hamish turned yer backs on me," Cormac spat. "I can never forgi' ye for being so great a fool."

"I'm no' so great a fool that I would bring a fugitive prince into these walls and flaunt my treason before ye all," Coll shot back.

Prince Charlie tensed. Ginny patted his arm. "He says what he must for all our sakes."

She felt his nod.

"Nay, ye're no' that much of a numpty. That I'll allow." Cormac's tone lost some of its menace and Ginny began to relax until he spoke again. "If I ever get my hands on this elusive Miss Hughes, though, I'll wring her neck until I have the answers I need."

There was a shuffle of feet, a grunt, then sounds of a scuffle. "Bugger it, Coll!"

The hidden door reverberated as a body was slammed against it. Both she and the prince leapt back in alarm. To their good fortune, the stream of profanities beyond the door drowned out their chorus of surprise.

"If ye ever lay so much as one finger on Ginny, I'll spill yer guts on the floor before ye can blink." Ginny shuddered at the pure venom in Coll's voice. Another thud shook the door and she pictured him bodily slamming his brother against the fireplace. "Feck, if ye so much as breathe a word against her, I swear, I'll run ye through."

"Got ye by the balls, has she?" A bark of laughter. "Just as the prince did."

There was the distinctive sound of flesh meeting flesh and many a curse and grunt of pain before Coll spoke again. "Take that as a warning, brother. Dinnae speak ill of her again. Ever. If I was willing to gi' my life to put a Stuart on the throne, imagine the measures I would take to spare the lass who holds my heart a moment's pain." Another shudder of the door and a pained moan. "The woman I mean to have as my wife. I will defend her wi' my last breath."

The words were raw with emotion, drenched in promise. A sweet ache pierced Ginny's heart and swept down her limbs. She pressed a hand to her chest to stifle the bruise left behind. She stopped him once before from expressing his feelings because she'd known it would hurt to hear them. For his sake as much as hers.

What she hadn't anticipated was how much elation they would bring.

"Five shillings," Prince Charlie whispered in her ear.

"I can't pay you if we're both dead, now shush."

## Chapter 41

"I do hope you two are pleased with yourselves."

Coll made a fist then flexed his fingers. His knuckles were bloody as was his lip. Overall, aye, he was extremely pleased with himself because Cormac was far the worse for wear than he. His brother sported a black eye, bruised jaw, and an oozing cut at his brow. No doubt his ribs would pain him for days. Most satisfying was the unnatural angle of his nose.

Having considered the conversation in the tower done, Coll had made the mistake of turning his back on his brother and walking away. Cormac had attacked him from behind. Given its effectiveness, Coll planned to keep the backward strike of the head that Ginny had almost taken him down with months before in his arsenal should he ever engage in hand-to-hand combat again. It was bloody effective.

And satisfying, he thought again.

If nothing else, he didn't believe his brother would be willing to cross him again in the near future.

"War hardened ye, brother." Cormac's voice was thick with pain.

"Aye, it did."

In many ways beyond the physical.

He'd been forced to harden his heart and his sensibilities against pain and remorse. There was no place for those things in war. No place for caring and kindness. There'd been a point when Coll feared he'd never come back from the dark place where his soul resided and find light again. Within a matter of weeks, Ginny had brought him into the sun again.

There were no lengths to which he wouldn't go to stay as he was now.

He wanted it all. His family, a clear future, and Ginny at his side. If he could have only one, he knew which of those he would choose.

"Miss Hughes, there you are. I must say, you're looking much better."

Coll's head jerked up as his mother spoke and spun around as Ginny entered the drawing room. Her clothes were straight and tidy. Her hair combed and smoothed back into a knot at the back of her head. The effects of a night at sea had been washed away. She may look "better" as his mother pointed out, but the sight of her there after the worries of the past hour was the best thing he'd ever laid eyes upon. She beamed at him, looking pleased with herself. His mood

ascended higher with hope that their troubles might be over. He was hard pressed not to crush her in his embrace.

When he'd followed Cormac into the old chapel, he'd been relieved not to discover her there. And utterly baffled. Until he recalled her unique ability, that is. Whatever else, it allowed for a convenient vanishing act when necessary.

"Thank you, Lady MacLeod. I am feeling much better. All I needed was a good walk and some fresh air."

Janet smiled. "It's certainly put the color back in your cheeks."

"Walh whee-er?"

Ginny's gaze shifted to Cormac and for a moment she looked as if she were trying not to smile. "I beg your pardon? I can't quite understand what you're saying with your nose as it is. That's a rather nasty nosebleed."

"Ginny, this is my older brother, Cormac," Coll introduced her with a warning glance for his sibling. "Whatever he meant to ask doesn't bear repeating, does it, brother?"

She definitely bit back a smile this time and he wondered what she knew, and more importantly, how she knew it.

"I'm afraid you missed luncheon, Miss Hughes," Janet went on, though a smile played at her lips, too. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm fine. Thank you."

"She's merely being polite, Mother. Miss Hughes disnae take an empty stomach well," Coll said. "If ye have no' objection, I will escort her to the kitchen to find something."

"Not at all. Though I hope you'll join us for dinner? I'm so looking forward to becoming acquainted with the woman who's captured my son's heart."

Ginny dropped into another curtsy, this one stiffer than the last. "It would be my pleasure."

She took Coll's arm and let him lead her into the hall. Her brow furrowed. "Where have ye been, lass? Is there something amiss?"

Her forehead smoothed and she smiled up at him. The gesture was tight, lacking her usual warmth. She hugged his arm. "That's a lot of questions. I'll answer your question with one of my own. Do you want to see what I found?"

"Aye." He looked back over his shoulder to see Cormac at the door watching them. He remained suspicious. "Best take a circular route in case my brother decides to follow."

"To the kitchen then? I am rather hungry."

As she'd eaten nothing more than a wee nibble of that tasty oatcake in the boat and had subsequently lost whatever else her stomach contained over the side of the boat, he imagined she was ravenous. He led her to a hidden stairwell in the corner of the tower

and motioned for her to proceed him. Once they were alone within the thick stone walls, he asked. "Where is the prince?"

"You'll see," she said secretively. "Where is Flora?"

"The long night and excitement of the day caught up wi' her. She's resting above." He looked down at her as they descended. In the glow of the lanterns affixed to the walls, he could see her expression remained troubled. "What is it, lass? Ye look worried."

"I'm fine. The prince is fine. We're all fine." Her tone was bright. Too bright.

Before he could question her further, they arrived in the servants hall below. Burke, MacEachine, and the oarsmen occupied a table on the far side of the room. Burke's eye waved them over with an exasperated shake of his head. "Ye've got pluck, lass, I'll say that for ye. I couldnae believe when ye passed through here before as if ye hadn't a care in the world."

The other men nodded in agreement, rousing Coll's curiosity. "What happened?"

"Why don't you let them tell you while I find something to eat?" She hugged his arm then released him, walking toward the kitchen as if she knew precisely where it was.

By the time she returned with a small plate of meat and cheese in hand, he'd heard a portion of the tale and like the others was curious to hear the rest.

"There's not much to tell about that," she told them quietly in case the wall had ears. "We got away. What you will love is how we did it."

As much as he wanted to question her further, Coll hesitated. There may be some things she would be unable to share in the presence of others. As he'd seen her with his own eyes and known she was in the tower and still couldn't make out how she'd done it, his curiosity won out. "Cormac said the priest's hole was empty. Where did ye hide?"

"We didn't." She leaned forward and they all did the same. "There's a secret passage out of the castle."

Coll sat back in surprise. "Nay. If there were surely my father would ken of it and have it searched."

"It's true as you'll soon see for yourself. Point is, we have a means of getting the prince away safely," she went on as if the rest of the men weren't stunned into silence by her revelation. "We can make ready to depart. Once the boats are gone, there will be no reason to suspect the prince is here or ever was. Coll can sneak him out after we're gone and rendezvous with us at the other Kilmuir on Loch Snizort."

"Best to meet at Monkstadt, I say," Burke added. "Sir Alexander

MacDonald is presently away at Fort Augustus. I ken Lady MacDonald can be convinced to gi' shelter."

"That sounds right," Ginny agreed.

Actually, it sounded all wrong to Coll. He didn't like the idea of separating his fate from Ginny's even for a few hours. Nor did he appreciate the casual manner in which she relayed her intention to leave him behind.

Again.

That was only the beginning of his issues. "What of the prince? There will be some suspicion if Betty Burke disnae depart as well."

There were a few grumbles of agreement around the table. MacEachine scratched his head. "Mayhap we could put about that she ran off wi' a sailor? I hear it happens now and again."

Och, this coming from the man who thought it a good idea to dress the prince up like a woman to begin with. Coll shook his head. "Remember, my father got a fair look at 'Betty.' He'll not believe it."

"It'll be fine." Ginny patted his arm. "It doesn't need to be a perfect story. It just needs to hold long enough for everyone to get away safely."

"If there were ever a time for ye to overthink things, lass, this is it. What will happen in the morn when it is discovered that I've disappeared, as well?" he pressed. "Suspensions will be reborn."

"It won't be an issue." She squeezed his arm with a meaningful look. "When should we leave?"

"After dark would be best," Auld MacLeod suggested and Burke nodded his agreement.

"Leaving too late would draw suspicion," Coll played devil's advocate. "What destination could be close enough to warrant travelling under complete darkness?"

"Coll's right. We could say that we are expected at this Monkstadt for dinner," she proposed, chewing her lower lip thoughtfully. "No, it's perfect really. We make a show of leaving. What is left to suspect if we're all gone?"

"Ye told my mother ye'd join us for dinner," he pointed out.

"I'm sure she'll understand."

Aye, but he wouldn't.

\* \* \*

Janet MacLeod, pleasant as she was, did not understand. The others could be on their way but Coll and Ginny would stay. Every insistence and argument waved aside and countered by assurances that her dear friend, Margaret MacDonald, would appreciate her need to get to know Ginny better, and that Coll could easily escort Ginny to Monkstadt in the morning.

"Let her leave," Tormond MacLeod rallied unwittingly in Ginny's

favor. "Let them both leave for that matter."

"If you don't like it, husband, you can be the one to leave. Return to London, if it pleases you. I will have my son here for as long as it pleases us both."

While Coll's father had proven himself a stubborn bastard, he was outdone by his wife. She laid down the hammer and her will would not be undone.

"I'd forgotten how she rules Dunchleach wi' an iron fist," Coll told Ginny as they accompanied the others back to the boats to say goodbye. "Now that I think upon it, I cannae recall a time when my father won an argument wi' her. It astonishes me that she wisnae able to regain my brother Hamish a seat at the table."

"Every parent has a favorite child," she reasoned. "They may deny it, but it's true. I think with her in your corner, you'll be able to stay home as you hoped. Maybe with enough time, he will come around."

"It disnae signify."

"It absolutely does." She slipped her hand into his. "It would make you happy and you deserve that."

"There are other things that would make me happier."

There it was. That little thrill that morphed into an ominous chill down her spine a heartbeat later. As it had on Benbecula and again when Janet so casually referred to her "as the woman my son loves." It meant that he'd revealed his true feelings when false ones would better aid his cause.

Because he loved her. Loved her enough to sacrifice for her.

That revelation was as staggering to Ginny as discovering she was from another time had been to Coll. There hadn't been time for her to process it over the past twenty-four hours, much less consider the implications. Deep down, she harbored a degree of dread for the days to come and the inevitable pain she would bring him.

Yet another scar her presence would leave on the past.

They reached the beach in the castle's sheltered cove. The men readied the boats while Coll, Flora, and she waited closer to the curtain wall in case Tormond or Cormac observed the departure from the castle. They'd avoided contact with the men in the past hour for that very reason. With luck, the others would be gone before the absence of a maid was noted.

It troubled Coll that he didn't know where Magnus had gone. Far away, she hoped.

"Goodbye, Ginny." Flora took her hand with a smile. "Oh, I know you said you would meet us tomorrow. Nevertheless, I feel you will discover other, more domestic, activities to occupy you."

It wasn't difficult to break the code on the seemingly cryptic words. Flora had been aware of the attraction between Ginny and Coll



before they left Nunton, and a byproduct of her time, assumed Ginny was ready to settle down into a life of blissful domesticity here at the castle.

It was a growing pet peeve of Ginny's to have people assume her relationship status.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she responded firmly.

Coll said his farewells before MacEachine returned to assist Flora into the boat. Burke passed them on his way up from the beach. He didn't look pleased.

"The Stuart kilt is missing from the boat," he told them. "Could be someone found it."

By her side, Coll tensed. She rushed to provide assurance. "I retrieved it before I came to find you. Sorry, I forgot to mention that. It's hidden with the prince."

Burke tugged at his gray whiskers giving her what she was beginning to consider his signature eyeroll. "When Auld Donell asked me to keep an eye out for ye, I dinnae ken ye were going to be giving me an apoplexy every time I turned around, lassie."

Auld Donell? Ginny blinked in surprise then gave an exasperated eyeroll of her own. Of course, he'd had a hand in all this. He was probably down in the kitchen right now sticking his fingers into a few more pots while he was at it.

"Auld Donell?" Coll repeated. "Ye mean the auld loch fisherman I used to see out and about wi' Donald MacLeod when I was younger?"

Ugh, the pots were everywhere.

And she'd become one of them.

## Chapter 42

*Later that night*

Ginny lounged on the bed in the chamber Janet assigned her reading a book she'd downloaded onto her phone to pass the time before the hour was late enough for them to make their final escape. And be done with this once and for all.

Done. Finished. It was that weighty prospect that blurred the words before her.

There was a tap at the door. She tucked her phone back into her bag as Coll slipped inside and closed the door behind him. The glow from the single candle he held illuminated his rugged features. Her heart did a backflip before she could brace herself for the effect he had on her.

Every. Single. Time.

"What are you doing? We can't leave yet. It's too early."

"I ken. I wanted to see ye before we left." His gaze was a physical caress. "I see my mother insisted ye bathe as well."

"Yes." She curled a damp lock of hair around her finger self-consciously, all too aware that they were both half-dressed. "And she gave me fresh clothes as well, bless her. She said we carried a frightful stench about us. I couldn't disagree."

He sat on the edge of the bed and set the candlestick down on the bedside table next to hers. Leaning closer, he sniffed and brushed his nose against her temple in the process. "Ye smell like the moors in springtime again." He pulled away and toyed with the strand of hair she released. "We hivnae a moment alone since we left the bothy. How are ye faring?"

*That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?*

"I'm good. Fine."

"Aye, ye said as much earlier. I dinnae believe ye then and I dinnae believe ye now."

"I'm fine," she insisted. "It's been a stressful few days. Thankfully it's almost over."

She waited for the inevitable questions, beginning with him asking if the prince would safely escape. That wasn't what she got. Not at all.

He stood and paced across the room before returning to stand by the bed and reached out to her. "Is it, lass? Is it almost over?"

Her skin tingled as he traced his fingers along her jaw and a rush of longing suffused her. She leaned into his touch, unconsciously hoping for more. He pulled his hand back as though he'd been burned.

"Och, ye wield yer wiles like a weapon. Dinnae think ye can distract me, lass."

"I wasn't using any wiles. I simply enjoy your touch. Is that so wrong?"

Even in the candlelight she could see his eyes flare. Distraction hadn't driven her. It wouldn't hurt though. She was used to him coming at her with questions about what she knew of the future. The questions he harbored now weren't ones she had an answer to. Unfortunately, she couldn't figure out how to make the time machine carry her farther into the future past the time she'd left or she could go get the answers she had about her own future for herself. The device only seemed capable to returning her to the precise moment she left her time.

"Coll..."

She reached out to touch his chest. He caught her hand and curled her fingers into a fist and surrounded it with both hands. "Ye're a rare temptress, *mo ghrá*. Ye make me forget my purpose."

"You mean your purpose wasn't to fill the hours before we left with something far more pleasant than talk of escape routes?"

"And dire consequences and imminent peril?"

A grin tugged at her lips and her knees sunk into the feather mattress as she rose to look him in the eye. "I love it when you talk all sexy."

"Did I?" He tried to appear stern and failed miserably.

Looping her arms around his neck, she nodded. "With an accent like yours, you could make anything sound erotic."

"Anything?" His voice softened to a low, husky burr that sent a shiver down her spine, proving her point. "How abou—?"

Given the wicked look in his eye, Ginny covered his mouth. "We don't need to test my theory."

"I like testing theories wi' ye." He kissed her palm. The tickle of his tongue on her sensitive flesh sent a chain reaction of longing through her that left her limbs heavy and her heart racing.

Deep in the recesses of her mind, a cautionary beacon pinged. It was unfair of her to carry on a sexual relationship with him, knowing how he felt, what he wanted from her. When Coll trailed his lips up her arm and sucked gently at the inside of her elbow, the rush of blood pounding in her ears drowned out the warning.

Ginny's breath caught in her throat as his finger traced the décolletage of her shift. He tugged at the ribbon that secured the gathered neckline. His calloused hand swept over her shoulder,

helping it slip down her arm. Her heart sprinted and her blood sang as he kissed her bared shoulder. His lips traced a path to the crook of her neck, nipping lightly. Helpless against him, she cradled his head and tilted hers to the side to encourage him.

“You know, you never did tell me what I supposedly said when we were in the cave.” The words were thick, slurred by the drunken spinning of her head.

“Did I no’? Perhaps I can make ye repeat them?”

Her leg quivered as his hand slid under her the hem of her shift and up her outer thigh, then inside. Surely he could feel her rising heat from there. Flush with embarrassment, she clamped her thighs together impeding his progress. His warm chuckle brushed her ear. Hot as brands, both hands covered her bottom and pulled her against him. The hard length of his erection pressed against her belly.

“Ah, *mo ghrá*, I have missed ye.”

“I want you, too.”

So, so much. She didn’t want to dwell on it. His hands slid up her hips, into the curve of her waist and up, carrying her shift up along the way. His mouth met hers the moment it was swept over her head. Hunger shot through her, a gnawing reminder of how she’d longed for his touch over the past weeks. She returned the kiss with all that unsatiated passion. Welcoming the sweep of his tongue with her own, challenging him to take more. A low rumble shook his chest. He pressed her back against the mattress and kneeled above her. The ropes beneath the mattress groaned under their combined weight.

She trembled under the caress of smoldering gaze as he looked his fill. Self-conscious, she reached for him, eager to block his view. “Coll, come to me.”

He shook his head and continued to look until Ginny was squirming.

“Ye’re such a bonny lass. Perfect in every way.” His brogue was thick with desire.

Damn if she wasn’t beginning to believe it.

A gasp caught in her throat as he traced a circle around her nipple. “These.” He cupped her breasts in his hands, kneading them. “Luscious.”

Her body bowed when his mouth covered one nipple, scorching hot. He sucked hard then his lips skimmed downward along with his hands, exploring each curve and valley with open satisfaction.

“This.” A throaty groan escaped her when he ran his finger down her cleft. “I regret no’ tasting ye more before. Ye dinnae ken the power ye have over me, lass. I was too desperate to have ye and listened to my cock like a lad wet behind the ears.”

For the first time, she felt that power and arched against his hand

with newfound confidence. "I didn't mind."

He looked up at her with a ravenous grin. "In retrospect, I did."

Spreading her legs wide, he bent his head. Ginny braced herself, but even with the knowledge of what was coming, was jolted by the contact. A ragged cry filled the room. Sweet, almost painful ecstasy flooded her, focusing all sensation on the play of his mouth. Her hips arched against him of their own accord, begging for the stroke of his tongue. He teased and sucked until she writhed beneath him.

"Coll!"

The plea was met by the thrust of his finger, sending her to the edge, but not over it. He crawled over her, tugging off his shirt. Before he could reach for his belt, she rose and ran her hand up his legs under his kilt. Curling her fingers around his hot, throbbing erection, she reveled in his raspy inhale. She traced the length of him, thick and long. Once, twice.

He moaned his surrender with that heartfelt word. "*Mo ghrá.*"

"Should I tease you as you tease me?"

He twitched in her palm with a curse. "I couldnae bear it. I maun have ye, lass."

His desperation became hers. Ginny drove her fingers into his shaggy hair and kissed him with all the ardor that boiled her blood. She laid back again, pulling him with her and entwined her legs around his hips. "Take me, Coll."

He did, driving into her with a harsh shout that was echoed by her delight. His lips took hers again, stealing her sighs. Devouring her moans. He fell into a pounding rhythm that drove her by leaps to the pinnacle of rapture. She met each thrust, the bed creaking and moaning along with them. Taking and giving everything she dared until the last of her reservations fell to the wayside. He watched her with heavy eyes, seeking her soul. Unable to bear the emotion there, she buried her face in his shoulder and raked his back with her nails. The friction of body against body fed their fervor. Tension coiled with undeniable poignancy until it wrung a sob from her.

"Coll! Oh, God, yes! Yes. I've never...Not like this," she panted, torn between straining toward the finish and fighting it to make the wonder last forever. "Oh-h-h, you are... Oh, you're everything. Ev-er-y-thing." The word was torn from her throat like an elongated moan. "You are mine. Mine!"

"Aye, lass. I am. And I have been since before the first time ye said so back in that cave."

He drove into her hard and Ginny splintered from within. Coll caught her scream with his lips, consuming it even as he extended her release until she convulsed around him anew. Like ripples on the water, the delicious spasms slowly disappeared. He slammed into her

again and a little mini orgasm shot through her as he came with a tortured groan.

Chest heaving, he collapsed on top of her, robbing her of the ability to breathe for a moment. Ginny didn't care. She was content where she was, the weight of him symbolic of the effect he had on her. Never crushing. Always uplifting.

How could she give that up? Did she even want to anymore?

"I love ye, lass."

Her heart must have expanded because she could barely draw a breath past the bittersweet ache. It spread, weighing down her limbs with... Oh, it had to be regret, she thought. What else could such profound words evoke? Something bigger. Something more. It was difficult to admit after all she'd experienced in life that extremes of emotion weren't something she could identify.

All she knew was that whatever it was Coll roused in her, she'd never known anything like it before.

"Oh, Coll..." No other words found their way to her lips.

He rolled to the side and looked down at her. "Ye've brought light to my life when all I've kent for too long is darkness. I ken ye've experienced the same," he said gruffly. "I want ye to stay wi' me, *mo ghrá*. Be my light and I'll be yers."

Her heart cracked. She was too late. The mistakes had been made. Again. Even knowing the risks, she'd been unable to stop herself from making them. Unfortunately, this time there would be no chance of staving off the heartbreak that would follow.

"We should probably get to Prince Charlie."

Lifting his head, he studied her for a long moment then nodded. "Aye."

"Coll..." He waited for her to speak. That made two of them. She had no idea what had been hovering on her lips. "Let's go."

## Chapter 43

"I thought ye maun be jesting when ye led me to the auld chapel, lass."

Coll shook his head in wonder when Ginny showed him where the lever was hidden that released the front panel of the fireplace surround to reveal the dark, narrow passage beyond.

"I played here as a bairn and feckless lad. I cannae believe there was a way out and my brothers and I never found it."

She glanced over her shoulder, her features cast in stark light and shadow of the single candle she carried. "Did you ever actively look for one?"

He inclined his head, taking the point in his favor. "Nor were we so rash of lads that we played inside hearths and chimneys. The lever inconspicuous besides, in my defense."

"I should have made you look for it." A hint of amusement threaded the words.

"Had we the time to spare, I would have enjoyed the hunt."

"Don't you remember what I've said? We have all the time in the world." She stepped into the chasm. "Careful, there are steps right here. Almost fell down them earlier."

Ducking his head, he squeezed through the portal sideways and closed the cleverly disguised door behind him. Thankfully, the passage itself was wider and taller though he best watch his head. The inky, unending darkness bent to the candlelight in equal measure to Ginny's progress as he followed in her footsteps. Her long, wavy hair swung in time to sway of her skirts giving the outward impression of the free-spirited lass she portrayed to the world. He wondered if those who knew her best would note the set of her shoulders and the stiffness in her spine as he did.

While part of him wondered where the passage led, the bulk of his attention was focused on her.

He'd pushed her too far.

He knew how her mind worked. The burden of thought and worry weighed heavily upon her. Though he was willing to share it with her, it wasn't something she was accustomed to distributing. Whether it was because she had no one to share it with or because she had no one she trusted, he wasn't certain. It had been rash of him to heap more upon her before some of that burden was shed.

The dread that their time was coming to an end spurred his hasty

confession.

As had his fear of losing her.

He didn't know what more he could do to change that fact.

If there was anything at all.

"Watch out, there are more steps here."

They descended at a steep incline then leveled out again. A dozen steps later, they climbed again. Given the few turns they'd made thus far, Coll could map out where they were heading. "If this comes out where I think, I'm doubly astounded we dinnae ever stumble upon this."

A faint light appeared in the distance and grew brighter as they neared. There was a shuffle of feet, then the light rose to illuminate Prince Charlie.

"At last, Miss Hughes."

"Did you expect me to leave you here to rot?" For the prince, there was light and laughter in her voice. Coll fought back a spurt of jealousy.

"I bore some fear that you would not return," Prince Charlie drew himself up regally. "Provide me the courtesy of some credit that I would consider departing of my own well before I expired of boredom."

"I'm surprised you didn't anyway," she said, speaking Coll's thought aloud.

The prince's shrug told him that it may have happened whether he admitted to it or not.

"Did you think to bring more foodstuffs, pray? I confess you're a better cook than I thought. Those cakes you gave me were splendid."

"Sorry, no."

The prince scowled, a ghastly sight in the shadows of the candlelight. "Shall we away then? I confess I'm eager to depart."

Without waiting for permission he did not want or require, the prince opened a door and stooped to waist level to pass through it. Ginny did the same, leaving Coll to fairly crawl through the opening. As he'd suspected, they emerged near the gardens. While he imagined a hidden door in the stone of the garden wall, he was shocked to step into the shallow water of the garden spring that fed into Loch Dunvegan. Turning back, he saw that the inner rock face of the stone arch bridge that led to the garden had given way to create the portal.

Closing the door, he ran his hand over it searching for some hint of what he'd missed all his life. There were none. It was cleverly done so that the ragged edges blended together seamlessly.

"Surprised?" Ginny's true smile was back, playful and teasing. She turned to the prince. "I told him I couldn't believe he didn't know where it was."



Coll shook his head. "I never had any idea."

"But *I* did."

\* \* \*

GINNY froze at the voice, fearing Tormond or Cormac had found them. She'd only begun to process that it wasn't a menacing masculine voice at all when Janet emerged from the shadows on the creek bank above.

"Mother?" Coll gaped. "How?"

"Tormond's grandmother told me about the passage before she died. I never saw reason to tell anyone else."

The explanation did nothing to vanquish Ginny's wonder. "I can't imagine why no one ever found it. It's fairly obvious from the breeze."

"Hmm," Janet frowned. "I must not have shut it tight last time I used it."

"How did ye get here past us?" Coll asked her as he climbed out of the creek and turned to give a hand to first Ginny and then the prince.

"I did not need to. After the battle in April, we began to fill in the channel on the north side of the castle. Had you taken the time to reacquaint yourself, you would have seen it," Janet chastised her son and looked from Prince Charlie to Ginny, raising a brow. "I saw where you were taking my son, and I decided to come out and meet you. Though, I'll admit, given what I heard, I assumed you'd be abed all night."

A slow burn crept up Ginny's cheeks.

Coll did not react to the statement. Either he was bent on ignoring it or having your parent catch you in bed in the 1700s wasn't as great a humiliation as it was in Ginny's time.

"Had I kent, I could have spared ourselves the trouble of this subterfuge."

"No, there are guards posted still." Janet took in their collective reaction. "Never fear, I made certain I was not followed. Best douse your light to be safe however." They did so. Her gaze shifted back to the prince. "You've taken a great risk coming to so inhospitable a place, your highness."

"So I've been told and have come to believe most fervently, madam." Prince Charlie bowed to her with flourish made comical by his costume. "Are you a part of that danger?"

She shook her head. "As I told the children earlier, Margaret MacDonald and I are quite dear friends. We both sympathize with a cause our husbands do not."

"I am most gratified to hear that."

She sounded sincere, but there was something in her voice that told Ginny there was something Janet was hiding. From the corner of her eye, she caught a hint of skepticism in Coll's guarded expression

and knew he felt the same. He looked at her and nodded.

"We should be on our way."

"And how were you planning on doing that?" Janet asked. "On foot? Why not take horses from the stables? Better you're back abed before dawn with no one the wiser than having to explain your absence."

Ginny hugged her bag. "We've got that covered."

"I still don't like it. There must be a better way." Coll's mother looked over her shoulder, tapping her foot.

As if she were waiting for someone.

Tensing, Ginny scanned the darkness for a potential threat, aware that Coll did the same.

After all they'd gone through, she couldn't believe they would fail now.

"Oh, now look what you've done," Janet protested to the air above. "They believe I'm about to betray them. Come now, show yourself."

\* \* \*

Coll flinched when a hand fell on his shoulder. Whipping his dirk from its sheath, he spun around prepared to strike. He was met by a familiar grin.

"Och, I thought ye were going to skewer me."

"I was, ye numpty." Coll reseated his blade with a shake of his head but couldn't stop the smile that spread across his lips. "Ye dinnae come up on a man like that. I could have killed ye."

With a laugh, the other man dodged to the left to avoid Coll's half-hearted punch and caught him up in a bear hug. Coll slapped him on the back as they parted and turned to Ginny and Prince Charlie who both gaped warily.

"May I present my brother Hamish. He fought upon the Drum Mossie Muir for ye, sir." He gestured toward Ginny. "Hamish, I ken ye recognize the prince. This is Ginny Hughes, whom I met escorting the prince to Arisaig by our uncle's request."

"A beauty awash in moonlight!" Hamish stepped forward to snatch up Ginny's hand and kiss it. "I should have seen to the task of bringing the news to Gortlick myself if it would have meant coming upon such a bonny lass."

While the sight of her in moonlight when they first met had equally dazzled him, Coll's amusement fell to the wayside and his fingers itched to draw his dirk once more, if only to make a point. Ginny was his.

He stifled the urge as Hamish was kin, and as yet, wasn't privy to Ginny's significance to Coll.

"A pleasant reunion but we tarry too long," Prince Charlie cut in,

his haughty tones akin to the first days they'd met. Coll understood he reacted to the difference between those loyal to him and those he trusted.

"Aye, enough of yer blethering, Hamish," Coll agreed. "We need to be on our way."

Janet stepped in with a shake of her head. "That is why I asked Hamish to come, anticipating your plan when you did not depart with the others. Yes, I recognized you earlier, your highness. You are fortunate my husband did not. I beg you to allow Hamish to escort you. Your safety is better assured if Coll's absence is not noted."

Duty made Coll rebel at the thought. "Nay, Mother. 'Tis no' Hamish's fight. Ginny and I will finish what we've begun."

"It is all our fight, brother," Hamish argued. "I would be glad for the chance to finish what I began back on that battlefield as well and ascribe some purpose to it all. Nae one kens I'm near other than Mother. There will be nae one to suspect. Trust me to do this."

Coll and the prince both turned to Ginny. With identical frowns, Hamish and Janet did the same.

"I will trust your insight, Miss Hughes," Prince Charlie said solemnly. "The decision is yers."

Tight lipped, she shook her head. Coll couldn't read her meaning.

"Ginny?"

She jerked her chin again.

"Yer lass kens better than to speak when there's a pistol pointed at yer head, cousin."

Coll spun around, hand on the butt of his pistol only to find himself staring down the barrel of one already cocked and at the ready.

"Dinnae do it," Magnus warned with a sneer. "Ye either, Hamish. Mine isnae the only weapon trained on ye."

From the corner of his eye, Coll saw his cousin did not speak false. Another two militiamen were close by with rifles aimed upon them. "I thought ye'd gone, Magnus."

"Yer father ordered me to return to Halistra. Unlike Cormac, I kent what I saw and stayed to search the grounds. And look what I caught. A family of traitors," Magnus sneered. "Toss yer weapons on the ground now. All of them."

Coll caught Ginny's eye. "Do it," he mouthed, hoping she would understand and work her magic to undo this disaster as she had the one on Benbecula.

Despite her pallor and obvious anxiety, she had her wits about her. With a nod, she reached into her bag.

Too late he saw the threat. "Nay!"

She screamed as massive arms encircled her from behind and

lifted her off her feet. Her eyes went wide with fright, then narrowed again the moment her feet were on the ground again. She threw back her head...

All hell broke loose.

Coll drove his elbow into his cousin's nose and dove forward to help Ginny after her attacker roared with pain and slammed her to the ground. Two shots rang out, but he paid them no mind. The man drew back his fist to hit her and caught Coll on the shoulder. Pain shot through his shoulder as he caught the man around the knees and took him down. Drawing his dirk, he struck downward toward the heart only to have it deflected. It sank into a meaty arm and there was a sickening scrape as the blade glanced off bone.

"Do it, Ginny. Now!"

"I— Shit, Coll!"

Something plowed into his side—Ginny—knocking him off his opponent as another gunshot sounded. He heard a feminine scream. His mother. Rolling onto his back, he saw her bite the hand of the soldier who held her while Prince Charlie fought against the other with surprising pugilistic skill. Hamish and Magnus circled each other, blades drawn. The clang of iron against iron filled the air now that all bullets had been spent.

All except one.

Ginny pushed back her tangled hair and reached for her bag only to have it yanked out of her hands by the beast he'd stabbed in the arm. Like a wounded bear, the blow had only angered him. He stood, dragging Ginny up by the strap. Coll sprang to his feet and drew his pistol. Before he could get a clear shot, the blackguard swung Ginny between them using her as a shield.

Icy fear clenched at Coll's heart as his knife, dripping with the man's blood, touched her throat.

"Ginny. Do it, lass."

A minute shake of her head. "I'd only take him with me."

Blood dripped from the blade onto her red silk bodice, more from the man's arms onto her skirts. The stain spread, a black blossom on the dark fabric. A portent of doom blackened his heart along with it. Should her blood spill as well...

The chilling ache in his chest boiled away under the fire of his rage.

"Drop yer weapon," the man demanded.

"Drop her first."

"Och, I'm nae fool."

"Aye, ye are to have laid a finger upon her."

Coll tossed the pistol to the side. When the man's eyes followed it, he drew his sword and swung a broad arc into his exposed side with

all the fury and desperation inside of him. With a roar of pain, he dropped Ginny and twisted away. The blade left his flesh with a sickening sound akin to that of a boot being pulled from a muddy bog. It was a sound he'd heard too often over the past year. One he'd hoped never to hear again.

With a prayer on his lips that he hadn't nicked Ginny in the process, Coll circled around and attacked once more. Another blow blocked with a thick arm and another striking bone. Fear replaced the menace on his opponent's face as he searched for an escape.

For the sake of the prince and his mother more than his own name, Coll could allow no quarter. Driving forward with a series of blows to the leg and to the chest, he found his opening and slashed across the man's midsection. His opponent began to fall. Coll's rush of desperation wilted as quickly. There was no flood of triumph, only disgust for what he'd been forced to do. He lowered his weapon.

"Coll!"

His mother's terror filled scream spun him around. Not for her own life. Her hands were being bound by one of the soldiers. Hamish still fought Magnus. Her fear was for Prince Charlie. The third had wrestled the prince to the ground and pulled out his sword, ready to spill royal blood.

Coll sprang onto motion and lifted his blade high bringing it down on crook of the soldier's neck. Blood spurted out. His mother screamed.

As did Ginny. Not something he thought to hear from her. He turned toward her to find the militiaman who'd been binding Janet's hands before him. The soldier's sword lifted for a death strike such as the one Coll had just employed upon his mate.

Ginny had been wrong. Time was not on his side. Dread and regret for all he would miss took his breath as the blade descended.

A shot rang out...

And the blade continued to descend to the ground while the soldier followed it, a look of shock on his face.

Behind him, Ginny stood with Coll's pistol in her hands. Eyes wide, she watched the man fall then dropped the gun before covering her mouth with her now trembling hands. Even from the distance, he could see the tears welling in her eyes.

Even without sight, he could feel the pain in her heart.

He caught her in his arms and cradled her against his chest. Between a sob and a whisper, he heard the words. "I took a life."

"Nay, *mo ghrá*, ye saved a life." He kissed her temple and brushed back her hair, coaxing her to look at him. "Ye already had my heart. Now I owe ye my life, aye? Thank ye. I ken what it cost ye."

Aye, he knew quite well. She would not suffer the guilt alone.

Ever.

Over her head, he watched as Hamish finally felled Magnus. Another regret. Coll knew that fight had only endured as long as it had because his brother had been reluctant to harm their clansmen much less end his life. The blood of four more Scotsman soaked into the ground. Whatever more Ginny had said on the matter, he couldn't help but wonder if there would ever truly come a day when the last drop would be spilt.

"Those shots have awakened the castle, ye thick, feckin' bampots!"

Coll's defenses went up again when Cormac melted out of the darkness. To his surprise, his brother held no weapon as their cousin had, rather the reins of two saddled horses. "I came across these two racing back to the haven of their stalls because of yer racket. Whatever yer about, I take it ye need them?"

"Aye. Thank ye, brother," Hamish answered, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth.

Cormac's eyes widened. "Dinnae expect to see ye here."

"Ye dinnae," Coll corrected him. "'Tis my hope ye willnae confess to seeing any of this."

His brother looked around at the bodies on the bank of the creek. "'Tis a difficult sight to forget. It will be even more difficult to clean up before someone notices."

"I will leave that to ye," Hamish said, taking the reins from him. "I maun be away wi' the... er, young lady in all haste now."

"Nay, I'll do it," Coll insisted.

"You've another to look after, my son," Janet said softly with a nod toward Ginny. "And yourself. You need to be here to allay suspicion if these soldiers are reported missing. Take Miss Hughes back to bed. Yes, I know you were together and I am not the only one. Your defense is set should you return without notice. There are others in the castle who can be trusted with this work. Come now, we must move quickly. Back to the passage with you. Hamish and 'Miss Burke,' mount, if you please."

As when they were lads, every MacLeod lad sprang into motion. Not one to be ruled, Prince Charlie came to Ginny, taking her hands in his. "You have done more than I would ever have asked, Miss Hughes. My regard and gratitude will forever be yours."

She nodded dumbly, staring at the dead men around her. "Goodbye, your highness."

"Should we meet again, I shall collect upon the debt you owe me."

The light, cryptic taunt roused her back to the moment. "Should we meet again, I will pay it. And please, remember what I told you. Whatever hardship comes your way, you will eventually find your

way home.”

With a grim nod, Prince Charlie mounted one of the horses and looked from her to Coll. “Care well for her, MacLeod. That is the last command I will give you.”

And the easiest to follow.

“Aye, sir. ’Til we meet again.”

The prince then turned to Cormac, thanking him for his silence.

“’Tis no’ for ye I do this,” Cormac responded. “’Tis for my brother and my family. I want ye gone from Scotland.”

“And for the time being, that is my desire, as well,” Prince Charlie returned. “Mark my words, by God’s will, I will return.”

## Chapter 44

“What wager was Prince Charlie referring to?”

Ginny ignored the leading question and offered one of her own. “Are you seriously insisting on carrying me through the entire castle and up the stairs when you must be hurt? That is what your mother meant by ‘see to yourself,’ isn’t it?”

Ginny smacked Coll’s uninjured shoulder and kicked until he freed her legs and lowered her feet to the floor. He closed her bedchamber door. “’Tis naught, lass.”

“Don’t give me that ‘it’s just a scratch’ shit.” In the light of the candle still burning by her bedside since their departure, she could see the bloodstain on the shoulder of his shirt. On closer examination, she found the tear in the linen. A hole, in fact. “You were shot!”

“Keep yer voice down,” he hissed. “The prince isnae safe yet.”

*Fuck the prince.*

She bit her lip to keep the words from spilling out along with a handful of others. “Take it off. Let me see. We can’t let it get infected. Did the bullet pass all the way through?”

Everything she’d seen on the subject told her that was an important factor.

What if it hadn’t? If he needed surgery to remove it? And stitches? Antibiotics? She should rewind time and take it all back. If there was an easy fix. She was afraid a Band-Aid wasn’t going to fix any of it.

“Still yer thoughts, *mo ghrá*.” He caught her hands and kissed her fingers. Releasing her, he pulled off his shirt and swiped it across the oozing wound. “See? It is a mere scratch. The musket ball did not enter.”

“Are you sure?” She pushed him closer toward her only source of light and forced—or rather, he allowed her to force—him to sit on the bed where she could see it better.

“Aye,” he assured her. “I’m more worried about ye.”

Ginny wet a cloth in the basin of water the maid had brought for her earlier and wrung it out before dabbing at the wound. It was more than a scratch. Wider but already healing over. He would be all right. As for herself, she wasn’t certain. She didn’t need to ask what he was referring to. She didn’t even need to close her eyes to see the way that man’s back had bent and his body lurched forward when the bullet hit him. It had replayed in her mind a thousand times already. She was sick to her very soul for what she’d done.



What she'd do again to save Coll's life.

Another thing to undo. If she could plot a course of action to avoid any of it.

"I'm fine." The faint assurance was all she could offer.

*Nothing a little therapy can't fix, Gin.*

"Are ye?" He caught her chin. "Ye ken ye did what ye maun, aye?"

"I suppose."

"Ye saved my life, Ginny lass. Ye were brave and strong. I'm proud of ye."

Oh, the eternal balm.

She caught her lower lips between her teeth. "Should we try it again? A little later maybe? Earlier? Maybe tomorrow?"

"Nay, lass." He traced his fingers along her jaw and followed them with a light kiss. "We were being watched. Or Hamish was. Magnus could have lingered out there for days or more. Ye cannae persist in second-guessing yer every action. Ye cannae assume responsibility for every defeat. I believe it all ended as well as it might. We are alive and well, as is the prince, my mother, and my brother. I couldnae face repeating the events only to lose one of ye in the process."

"You wouldn't have to know."

"Och, dinnae think to exclude me again." He took her hands and squeezed them tight. "This is life, *mo ghrá*. Come what may. Whatever ye may think, we're intended to have only one chance at it. Now cease yer fussing and come here."

He slipped his fingers behind her neck and urged her down to meet his kiss. His lips were warm with life, exploring hers with tenderness far removed from the violence of the night. She let him turn her until she sat on his lap and she wrapped her arms around him, holding him as if he were the most precious thing on earth.

Maybe he was.

His lips played over hers sweetly for what seemed an eternity. Time well spent, as far as Ginny was concerned. Her racing thoughts slowed and her mind calmed. His tongue traced along her lower lip, drawing a low moan from her. In an instant, his kiss changed. The mood shifted. His body tensed. Hands content to hold her close began to roam, one up to her breast. The other down to her hip.

"Are you serious?" She murmured, drawing back. "You've been shot."

"Only to realize I'm verra much alive."

His chocolatey eyes melted into a steamy cocoa. Slipping his hand into her squared neckline, he caught her nipple and rolled it between his fingers. Helpless pleasure shot through her and she arched into his hand.

“Aye, lass,” he growled softly. “Let me feel ye come alive.”

He kissed her again, this time slanting his mouth over hers. Delving deep, searching as he continued to tease her sensitive nipple. Warmth pooled in her belly, birthing the sweet agony of desire. She squirmed in his lap.

“Aye, *mo ghrá*,” he groaned against her lips. “Can ye feel it?”

“Every time.”

Every hour. Every minute.

She was alive because of him. She *lived* again because of him.

He stood and carried her to her feet, and began unlacing her bodice. Having dressed hastily before, he knew she wore no stays. Unknotting her skirt, he let it fall to the floor and bent to unroll her stockings one by one. Her knees trembled as he caressed her legs and kissed her along the way. Within moments, her shift was gone and she was naked. The passion in his eyes made her proud of her many curves. She squared her shoulders and let him look, knowing he thought her beautiful and irresistible.

No. More than that. Knowing herself that she was beautiful.

Ginny took her turn, unbuckling his belt so his kilt fell free. Thick with sculpted muscle, as far as she was concerned, he was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. She unlaced his brogues but he kicked them off before she could do it for him. He toed off his socks and lifted her into his arms intent on tumbling her to the mattress, no doubt.

A flush of embarrassment warmed her cheeks at the memory of what his mother had said. “Not there. It's too loud.”

“Tis rather late for modesty, lass.” His chuckle shook them both. He scanned the room. “Will a stone wall suffice?”

“I don't know. I thought they were thick enough to disguise all sound. Now I have no faith.”

He laughed again and kissed her hard turning her in his embrace. “Have faith in me then. Wrap yer legs around me, lass.”

She did, and met his steamy kiss in kind. Smooth wood met her back, a sharp contrast to the heat of his chest against hers. His heart pounded, moving them both. Coll slid his hands under her bottom and pinned her against the door. His fingers teased her cleft in slow strokes as gentle as his kiss. His tender passion, so at odds with their fiery union earlier, not only left her boneless with desire but tore her heart asunder.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he buried his face in the crook of her neck with a rumbling groan that reverberated through her. “Yer sweet cunny's wet for me. Tell me ye want me.”

“More than that. I need you,” she confessed, entwining her ankles and pulling him closer. “Love me, Coll.”

“I do.”

Lifting her, he eased her down on his pulsing erection with agonizing leisure, filling her. Making her whole. Driving her mad with the slow friction until she was seated to the hilt. The muscles on her inner thighs quivered and a tormented ache blossomed at her core. He flexed his hips driving deeper than she thought possible. Her blood flowed like molten lava, melting her limbs and firing her ardor. Her head spun and she collapsed against his shoulder.

Finally, he began to move. He made love to her with slow, gentle strokes designed to torture, and hoarse words of love and praise that brought tears to her eyes. The hair on his chest chafed against her nipples until they ached. Every breath was an effort through her suddenly tight throat. Shallow, raspy pants mixed with pleading sobs as he ravished her body and soul until she could take no more.

Until she surrendered completely.

\* \* \*

A groan wrenched its way from deep in his chest when Ginny began to nip and suck at his neck. Her tongue dipped into the hollow of his throat, tracing its path. A shudder shook him. She nipped at his chin and bottom lip before her tongue darted out to lick away the wound. Coll tensed, missing a beat in the beguiling rhythm of their bodies.

He'd been lost to the sweet music they made together, absorbed by her bewitching sobs and pleading sighs, and wanted to draw it out for an eternity. Now his blood pumped hot, his languid passion erupting into frenzied need. Gripping her supple hips, he plunged hard and deep, slamming her against the door.

She threw her head back with a throaty cry of delight. “Yes!”

His body echoed the sentiment and threatened to erupt. Reining his ardor in, he drove into her scorching depths faster and harder. Her nails bit into his shoulders, conveying the same urgency as her cries of ecstasy. Coll raked his teeth down her exposed throat, adoring the vibration of her increasingly desperate moans against his lips. It was perhaps the most arousing thing he'd ever known.

“Och, *mo ghrá*, ye'll bring me to my knees.”

She tightened around him with another ragged sob and he almost spilled right there. Urgency galvanized him. He turned to carry her to the bed but couldn't make it more than a few steps. Instead, he pushed her back against the bed post and pounded into her again, unable to help himself. Another turn and he let her fall back on the bed. Holding her hips high, he ravished her depths, savoring every caress of her hot, tight sheath.

Ginny's hand fisted in the bed covers, her head thrashing from side to side. Her anguished sobs turned to panted profanities and Coll

knew she was close. "Look at me. Open yer eyes, *mo ghrá*, let me see ye."

Her lashes fluttered and opened until she stared up at him with tears glistening in her bonny periwinkle eyes. Her face was flushed with color, her parted lips dewy. Sweat glistened on her throat, breasts, and belly. For the rest of his days, the sight would be forever emblazoned in his mind. In this, her gift of remembering would be his.

"Och, I love ye, lass."

"Coll!"

She convulsed around him. He plunged deep one more time and watched her find her paradise. Reveled in it as it swept through her and into him before he let go and came inside her. Again and again, until he was wrung dry. Ginny opened her arms and he fell gladly into her embrace.

He was finally home.

\* \* \*

Ginny snuggled against Coll's chest, luxuriating in the weight of his body...and the delicious thrum of her body as her orgasm fell away in ripples. He made her scream. He made her heart sing. She'd never known it could be like that, beyond fulfilling.

She didn't know it could get better every time.

He pressed soft kisses to her neck, cheek, and lips then lifted her until she was propped on the pillows and settled in next to her. She rested her cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat and tracing a fingertip across his ribs while he wove his fingers through her hair.

"What I said earlier, that my father receiving me back home dinnae signify, was the truth," he said in a low, heartfelt brogue. "I may never recoup a life here at Dunchleach, but I will never be homeless. *Ye're* my home, lass. Ye've given me something I thought lost. I thought I would dwell in darkness for the rest of my days but ye've given me light and anticipation for life itself. I am alive again and at peace wi' what I've done. That is because of ye."

The confession pierced her heart. It was more powerful than mere words of love. She stilled uncertain how to respond. "What if I can't be all that, always?"

"Ginny lass, look at me." She looked up, prepared for the power of his smolder. It was there along with a new tenderness. He caressed her lower lip with his thumb. "Dinnae fash, lass. I'll admit, I maun be a bit of a dullard no' to have realized earlier that ye're troubled by emotion. Mine, no' yers. I've never been one to prevaricate. I ken what I want and make quick decisions. Ye and I are verra different in that. I ken ye need to weigh and reweigh what ye want.

"Coll..."

“Part of me wants to fight for ye but I ken that isnae what ye need. Ye need to make a choice on yer own. I want ye to stay wi’ me. I want ye as my wife, my helpmate, but I ken there are no guarantees in life. Any life. I’ll take whatever time I can have wi’ ye. Whether it be a day, a week, or a lifetime that ye allow me, I will thank God for it.”

A tear slipped down her cheek and he wiped them away. “Coll, I —”

“Let me finish,” he rushed on. “Ye said I need a new mission in life. I’ve found one, and I’d like to share it wi’ ye. Ye’re husband wisnae kind. I ken ye’ve reason to be wary. Trust that I will never demean ye. I want a partner in life. No’ a servant.”

“Coll—” she tried again only to have him press his fingers to her lips.

“Ye dinnae have to say anything now, lass. I willnae push ye again. I wanted to tell ye I understand ye, lass. I ken ye. What I will ask for is time. If I understand it right, ye’ve that in spades, aye? Spend it wi’ me.”

Ginny dashed a hand across her cheeks. Somewhere in the middle of that, tears had poured from her eyes. He understood her. He *saw* her. Perhaps as no one in her life ever had.

She wished things were different but couldn’t tell him that.

She wished time could change anything, but she couldn’t guarantee that either.

Yes, she had time to spare. No matter how much she had, she was afraid it would end badly.

“Are you going to keep interrupting me?” she teased softly. “You’re not letting me get a word in edgewise.”

He tried for a smile. It slipped away with a sigh. He ran a hand over his head. “Aye. Because I can see ye mean to deny me. I merely want ye to consider it, lass. I want to spend time wi’ ye unfettered by danger and intrigue, no matter how the words fall from my lips to yer ears.”

It sounded lovely. Reality continued to nag at her. She really couldn’t let it go.

“I’m not sure I have a choice in it,” she told him. “Every move I make here, even spending a moment longer than necessary, has the potential to change history as I know it. My actions have already changed so much. Broken so much. There is a man out there who would be alive if I hadn’t interfered with the natural order. Maybe four.”

“How many would be dead if ye dinnae?” he argued. “Who is to say what history should be?”

He made sense, but Ginny wasn’t confident she had a voice in the matter. Or what she would say if she did. It wasn’t only her mistakes

in the past that influenced her. It was her past mistakes.

"I don't know if it's that easy. I don't know. I just don't know what is possible anymore." She rubbed her temples. "There's so much to consider."

So much that could go wrong. The possibility, however vague, that this would not end well for her in the long run.

"Yer thoughts betray ye, *mo ghrá*." He lifted her chin until she met his tender gaze. "Is it regret ye fear? I swear I shall love ye well enough that ye'd have nae reason to regret."

Regret. It was really what was at the heart of her indecision.

"At least promise me this," he continued, seeing her uncertainty. "Promise me ye willnae leave me wi'out a word again. Grant me that."

Relief swept over her, easing her troubled thoughts once more. That, she could do.

"I promise."

"Thank ye."

He kissed her softly and held her cradled in his arms. Ginny laid her head on his chest again, listening to the strong, confident beat of his heart. She was reminded of the time they'd spent in the cave while evading the English soldiers. Even surrounded by the other men, it had felt intimate. She'd never known a connection like that. Sitting there, doing essentially nothing. Yet there was contentment, comfort there. There'd hardly been a hug between her and Luke in the last months of the marriage. Yet, he'd rebelled when she left him.

Now a part of her rebelled at the thought of leaving Coll.

Emotion she refused to admit to welled in her heart.

"Coll?"

"Aye, *mo ghrá*?"

"Will you take me back to Nunton?"

He craned his neck to look at her. "Why?"

"There's something I need to do," she told him.

"Something in yer life?" She nodded. "Aye."

No questions, just that.

Aye.

If only the rest were so easy.

## Chapter 45

*Nunton House on the Isle of Benbecula, Scotland*  
*June 1746*

“Ye’re saying the estate of Lord Clanranald becomes an *inn*?”

“Close enough.”

Ginny squeezed Coll’s hand as he helped her climb over the bow of his father’s birlinn and onto solid ground once again. Sometimes she thought if she never saw another boat, it would be too soon. Another awaited her shortly. Thankfully, modern ferries were a far cry from wee single sail boats that bobbed like crazy on the open water.

“And ye stayed here?”

“I considered it. The cottage on South Uist that was far nicer though,” she told him as they walked up the beach and around the side of the manor where they would be out of sight of the oarsmen waiting on the boat.

“It was rather nice.” He nuzzled her neck with a husky laugh. “Yer future provides for cold drinks and warm beds. What more could a man ask?”

“You think a modern kitchen and bathroom are all the future holds?” She laughed. “You hardly took a step beyond the beach.”

“I dinnae need to. I had all I needed.”

There’d been plenty of time during the trip across the Minch to answers his questions about her time and her home. He’d asked her about Prince Charlie’s safety, something she assured him she would look into. Coll was mostly curious about her family and the stories she shared about growing up with her sisters. He said he wanted to know her, not a place essentially in a faraway land. He did have questions about the impending vote for Scotland to regain its sovereignty free of Great Britain and the politics behind it. Unfamiliar with the referendum, she’d offered to read up on it while she was gone.

Then impulsively invited him along to find out for himself.

To her surprise, he accepted and—rather bravely, in Ginny’s opinion—agreed to spend a few days at the blackhouse cottage she’d rented on South Uist. Though cautious, he hadn’t floundered as he’d feared he might, and his natural inquisitiveness triumphed in the end. They’d fed his political curiosity and the desire to spend more time together with long walks on the beach and basked in glorious sunsets. With the familiar, rustic structure and solitary location as a backdrop,

he'd been able to take a few baby steps into the future. Mostly, they'd made good use of bed, shower, kitchen counter...A slow, satisfied smile tugged at her lips. They'd spent days making love.

And putting off the inevitable before making the short journey to Nunton where she'd left Donell's car.

It was enough of a stretch for him. Maybe someday he would test his footing farther afield from the isolation of the Outer Hebrides.

If there was a someday.

Slipping her arms over his shoulders, Ginny kissed him softly. Then realizing how long it might be—for her—before she saw him again, kissed him as if it were her last chance. His arms came around her, clutching her as if he sensed it, too.

"Go inside and have some tea. I'll be back before you know I'm gone." She drew away and smiled up at him, aware that the playful mood of moments before was quickly fading away. "Literally, before you know I'm gone. I promise."

His nod was stiff. Their return to his time only seconds after leaving, with the oarsmen still waiting patiently where they'd left them at the boat, had astounded Coll but also reinforced her meaning. He had no reason to worry.

Yet he clearly did.

As did she.

"You can come with me."

*Please come with me.*

"Aye, so ye've said." Coll offered a tight smile and handed over her backpack. "Ye ken where I stand, lass. Seek the answers ye need. I will be here when ye return."

He kissed her hand and whispered his farewell, clearly torn between uncertainty and faith in her word. He needn't be. She would be back. For a proper goodbye if nothing else.

He did not tell her he loved her again.

Ginny supposed one could only say it so many times without hearing the words echoed in return. Once he rounded the corner, she dug the time machine out of her bag. Her limbs were leaden with anxiety. She pressed the button that she hoped would bring her the answers she needed.

Did she or didn't she?

That was what she needed to figure out.

\* \* \*

*Present Day*

"Oh my God, Gin, where have you been?"

Ginny winced and turned down the hands-free speaker volume in Donell's car.



“Everyone’s worried about you. I didn’t know what to tell anyone!”

Reception on the island being what it was, it had been weeks since they’d spoken. A ferry ride and the entire island of Skye behind her, she’d finally found the coverage—and nerve—to call and confess the bare bones of her problem.

“I have no idea what to do.” She blurted it out. No context, no clue to what she referred.

Brontë caught on quick. “Give me some background here. Tell me about him. When’s he from?”

Ginny could just picture her sister plopping down on the bed, getting comfortable for a long talk. The sort they hadn’t had in years but that she desperately needed now. She needed a sister. A friend.

“His name is Coll MacLeod. Cailin,” she said. “It’s the summer after the Battle of Culloden which he fought in. He lives at Dunchleach Castle.”

“Oh,” Brontë sighed. “I’ve heard the gardens are beautiful.”

A chuckle bubbled in Ginny’s throat. “They’re working on it.”

“And I remember you saying he’s perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect, right? I mean, he’s kind, loyal.”

This time her sister’s sigh was a bit more exasperated. “He’s not a puppy, Gin. At least I hope not.” When Ginny didn’t respond right away, she added, “Well, come on, what’s he like?”

The moment she thought about Coll, a pang of yearning struck her. “He’s strong-willed, willing to fight for what he wants and what he believes in. He’s that guy who will make the sacrifice for what he wants.”

“Hmm. How about a sense of humor? Does he make you laugh?”

“It’s subtle but there. I wouldn’t say I laugh so much as smile.”

There was a heartbeat of a pause. “Wow. From you, that’s saying a lot. I can’t wait to meet him.”

“Can you?” Ginny got to one of the major sticking points. “Can anything come of it?”

“If you want it to. Do you?”

She veered away from the question. “I’m not sure I have a say in the matter. My situation isn’t like yours. I’m not a part of Donell’s master plan and every time I’ve gone back, I seem to have made things worse. Right and wrong are warring in my mind. It seems so obvious that it’s wrong, from the time perspective.”

“Believe me, if your being there was a problem, Donell would have yanked you out of there straight away,” Brontë assured her. “If he let you stay, maybe it was meant to be. Is it?”

It sure felt like it.

Her pause said more than she intended. Her sister’s sigh flowed

from the speakers. "There's the sister I know and love. Second guessing everything. Stressing about things before there's even something to stress about. Let me guess, you've got What-Could-Go-Wrong's greatest hits playing on a continuous loop in your head?"

Ginny winced. Brontë did know her pretty well. She almost wished Donell were there now. To take the choice out of her hands.

"You want the entire playlist?"

"Knowing you? God, no. Let's do the top ten."

Changing lanes to pass a puttering lorry, Ginny tried to sort through her issues. "He's from another time, for starters. There's a lot of downsides in that."

"We're not talking about the lack of good pizza delivery," Brontë clucked her tongue.

"It's not only the lack of pizza and decent plumbing. There's horses and an ungodly number of boats involved."

"That's just more problems with the pizza. C'mon, Gin. Give me something real."

"It's a legitimate point! He's lives in the mid-1700s. I mean there's long distance relationships then there's *long distance* relationships, right? If I stayed there, there would be a learning curve so I don't keep standing out like a sore thumb."

"I get it. It's a rough life."

Yet she felt alive for the first time in a long time.

That truth tugged on her heartstrings.

There was a soft chuckle on the other end of the line. "He must have told you he loves you to have you in such a tizzy."

The area she was passing through wasn't far from the route they'd taken after leaving Invergarry Castle. Clouds hung low to the rugged landscape, clinging to the green moors broken by gray outcroppings of rock. Unlike her homeland, Scotland called to her heart in so many ways.

"He said I am home to him."

"Nice."

Ginny jerked the wheel speeding around another car. "No, not nice. Look at me. Look at my history of failed relationships. I'm not home. I'm-I'm temporary housing!"

And maybe that was the crux of the problem. Ugh, did she think she wasn't loveable enough?

"You're being too hard on yourself," Brontë said softly. "I think we can safely place the reasons for your divorce on Luke."

"Maybe." Ginny gnawed her lower lip. For the first time since she'd left him, she could accept that the majority of the problems with her marriage were because of Luke. "I'm sure I did something to play a part in it. Maybe I could have been less independent. More willing

to let him be the man.”

“You mean, be someone else entirely.” Her sister clucked her tongue the way their mother used to. “Gin, you bent in every direction to placate him even when you shouldn’t have. You don’t need to do that to have a happy relationship.”

“Really? If I stayed with Coll, there would be a fair amount of bending involved.”

“Bending to a time zone isn’t the same as changing who you are for another person,” Brontë argued. “I’m going to ask you to trust me on that.”

Ginny tapped her fingers against the steering wheel, mind racing faster than the vehicle. She did. And that really wasn’t the problem, was it?

Traffic slowed as she rolled into Invergarry, a good-sized town where one had barely existed. Once through, she searched for the castle but couldn’t see anything past the treelined road.

“I told you before, I’ve been through some dark shit with Luke. I don’t think I could ever bear to go there again.”

“And I told you, sometimes you have to walk through some shit to be able to appreciate the scent of the roses.”

“Yea, what is that supposed to mean exactly?”

“It means, you can’t appreciate the light if you’ve never been lost in the dark. I could probably give you a dozen other variations but I know you get my meaning.”

She didn’t need them. She understood perfectly now.

*I thought I would dwell in darkness for the rest of my days but ye’ve given me light.*

He’d done the same for her.

“It all seems so wonderful when I’m with him. What if it doesn’t last?”

There was a split in the road ahead. Her GPS told her to keep right. The posted sign hinted she should do something different.

“You’re afraid you’ll regret staying with him?”

No. That wasn’t what she was afraid of at all.

“Ginny?”

“Um, let me call you back. I think there’s something I need to do first.”

“Gin—”

Ginny ended the call and gripped the wheel.

Desperate times called for desperate measures.

## Chapter 46

*Inverness, Scotland  
Present Day*

She shouldn't be doing this.

It had stalker written all over it and if there was one thing she'd come to hate, it was stalkers. If she weren't so filled with doubt about what she should do, the assuredness that she definitely shouldn't be doing this might have steered Ginny clear. The farther she got from Skye, the more it had become clear that leaving Coll for the third time had been even more difficult than the first two.

Ginny checked the house number one more time and rang the bell. The red brick, two-story rowhouse was nearly identical to the dozen others that sat along Douglas Row on the banks of River Ness. A treelined street with an amazing view. It might have been the prettiest neighborhood she'd ever seen. If things went sideways, maybe she'd—

"Can I help you?"

The redhead she'd seen with Hugh Urquhart that day at the Urquhart clan stone at Culloden Battlefield answered the door. She was utterly gorgeous, tall and willowy. Her accent was American, her bright blue gaze friendly yet inquisitive. With a stranger at her door, it made sense. As if five hours in the car hadn't provided enough time, Ginny inanely wished she'd taken longer to answer.

"I'd like to speak with Hugh Urquhart if he's available, please." The friendly faded from the woman's eyes and Ginny rushed to reassure her. "I'm sorry. My name is Ginny Hughes. I'm not a crazy person or anything, I just wanted to ask him a question."

"You can send him a message on his author website."

She started to close the door. Short of jamming her foot against the door to stop her, Ginny didn't know what to do. "Please! It's not that sort of question. I know this is unusual, but—"

"Who is it, Sorcha?" a deep masculine brogue called from a room or so away.

Then behind the woman—Sorcha, did he say?—she saw him at the parlor door. Tall, dark, and as devastating as before, though Ginny found she favored lighter hair these days. What did pull at her heartstrings however was the fact that he held an infant in one arm

while a raven-haired toddler perched on the other, its chubby fingers tugging at his collar.

Babies that looked like their father. Her heart squeezed.

"I saw you at Culloden," Ginny blurted out.

The woman's frown deepened then her brow smoothed. "Oh, yes. When we visited the other day."

Ginny shook her head. "No, not then."

Sorcha's head cocked to one side. "Well, we go every year. I must be remembering wrong."

Ginny shook her head again, the motion tight with anticipation. She stared past her at Hugh. "No, none of those years."

"Then how—"

"Ye saw it," Hugh interrupted his wife, his brogue suddenly raspy.

"Yes." Ginny swallowed hard recognizing the emotion in his voice. Coll's carried it every time he spoke of that day. "I did."

"Saw what?" Sorcha asked, looking between them.

He peeled the toddler off him and set her on the floor with a light tap to her behind to set her on her way. "Go play wi' Connor, lassie." Then to the woman. "Let her in, Sorcha. I'm curious what she has to say."

She stepped back and waved Ginny in. Ginny tried for a smile and failed spectacularly. "Thank you so much. Sorcha, is it?"

"Claire, actually. Sorcha is a Gaelic version of it." She led Ginny into the living space that was simple in design yet overflowing with toys. "Excuse the mess, we weren't expecting guests. Hugh doesn't like Sassenachs. Ginny, was it? Short for Virginia, perhaps?"

There was no malice in the jab. In fact, it appeared as though she were teasing, so Ginny played along despite the urgent solemnity in her heart. She chewed her lip, staring up at him. "It is. I hope you won't hold it against me."

"Nay, I've come to enjoy many Sassenachs over the past few years," Hugh said and indicated a chair next to the fireplace. "Will ye sit, lass?"

"I prefer to stand, if you don't mind."

"Nay, I'm no' too interested in the niceties at the moment either." He crossed his arms over his broad chest, his gaze intense. "Ye saw me there on the Drummossie Muir?"

"Yes, I saw you chase that redcoat and fall through the portal."

Claire gasped at her response. Her husband had been better prepared for it though he seemed to drift away for a moment before he focused on her again.

"Ye're from there?"

"From here, actually. Or rather now." While she fumbled for an explanation—one she'd spent the past hour rehearsing enough times

not to screw it up like this—the baby in his arms fussed. Not crying so much as grouching a bit. Still, it flustered her. She was doing this all wrong. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude. I just wanted to ask you a quick question.”

Hugh bounced the baby as if it were second nature. “I have a few of my own, but ye first.”

“I wanted to ask...” Ginny bit her lip then rushed on. “I was going to ask you if it was worth it, but I can see now that would be a stupid question. I guess I’d ask instead, do you have any regrets? About staying here rather than returning to your own time, that is.”

She saw the answer before he spoke. “Nay. None of us do.”

What she wouldn’t give for such confidence. “Not even in the begin— Wait, did you say none of us? Oh my God, how many are there?”

“Mayhap we best sit down. This may take some explaining.”

By the time he was finished with his story, Ginny had wilted against the sofa and chugged down the glass of water Claire had brought her, wishing it was something stronger.

Donell hadn’t been lying. With everything Hugh had told her—what she suspected was only a slice of the old man’s big, finger-filled pie—three lifetimes didn’t begin to cover it. There were people, now families all through time living lives initiated by him as part of his master plan. Hugh assured her that their personal happiness had been a part of it. He’d meant for them to be content with their new lives. As he was. As Brontë and Tris were. And Connor and Emmy. Laird and— holy crap, the famous actress—Scarlett Thomas, who’d disappeared almost a decade before.

“I think you can add your cousin to that list,” she told him. “Keir, right?”

A smile touched his lips. “Aye, Auld Donell assured me he was well. Have ye met him?”

“I haven’t. Yet. But my...friend has. And his wife, Al, too.”

“Allora,” Claire corrected. “I didn’t know her well but we used to work at the same place before she accidentally traded places with Hugh that day.”

Ginny remembered the look on the man’s face who’d been chasing Hugh and remembered thinking she’d hate to be the one to face him. Luckily, this Al seemed to have weathered the storm all right.

“In the beginning, were you this certain?”

“No’ at all,” Hugh laughed and shared a tender smile with his wife. “I had no choice in the matter and fought against it. Until...”

“You didn’t anymore,” Claire finished for him, clasping his hand.

Ginny felt like an intruder just then. There was just one more thing she wanted to ask before she left them to finish the day off as

she suspected they might. "And if I were to offer you the opportunity to undo it, would you?"

Hugh and Claire both stared at the device she held in her hand. Hugh didn't take it.

Didn't hesitate.

"No' a minute."

*"Dinnae fret for me, mo ghrá. I would sooner welcome a bayonet here than leave it barren of the joy I've kent wi' ye."*

Ginny's chin trembled at the flood of emotion that threatened to consume her.

Claire broke the tension with a laugh. "Oh, don't let him fool you. He would love a visit."

\* \* \*

*The home of Violet Graham  
Leith, Scotland  
Later that night*

Ginny welcomed her sister's embrace, relished it in fact.

"Where were you? I thought you'd be here hours ago!"

"I had to take a little detour. Sorry, it took longer than I thought."

A couple days, in fact, and a trip to Rosebraugh Castle to take Hugh to see his cousin and for her to meet her potential new best friend. Al was a treat. A science nerd and a geek who'd enjoyed catching up on all the Marvel movies.

"So what's the verdict?" Brontë asked as she poured them some wine and dropped down onto the couch with her. "You aren't still overthinking it, are you? How stupid of me. Of course, you are."

"So pushy." She'd hardly sat down yet and the interrogation began. Again. "This isn't something I can afford to get wrong."

"Gin, come on. It's not that hard. Do you love this guy?"

Ginny couldn't get the words to form and her sister sighed in exasperation. "You know, I've been thinking about everything you said, and you want to know what it sounds like to me?" Ginny shook her head, only to be ignored. "It sounds like you've thought of every reason not to love him."

Because that's what she did. It was who she was. She thought and thought some more until she talked herself either into trouble or out of what might have been the right decision. And she was doing it now.

"It isn't that simple."

"Do you remember when we were kids and you, me, and Jane would play double dutch?" She acknowledged Ginny's eyeroll with one of her own. "What am I saying? Of course, you remember. My point is, when it was your turn, you would wait and wait and wait for the right moment to jump in until Jane and I got so irritated that you

would lose your turn.”

“If there’s a lesson in there somewhere I don’t know what it is.”

“Wow, I wouldn’t even need to see your face to hear the bullshit in that. Do I sound like that when I lie? I can’t believe Tris was right about that.” Brontë sighed. “Yes, there’s a lesson there. Sometimes you need to make the leap and hope it’s the right one.”

And then what? Deep down, she knew what the problem was.

She stared down into her wine. She just didn’t know how to fix it.

“C’mon, what’s holding you back?”

Ginny drank some wine and forced herself to pinpoint what exactly she was afraid of.

“Man, when you get too deep in your own head, you’re your own worst enemy,” Brontë said. “You know what you need? You need to do the unthinkable. Forget. Forget Luke and all the shit that’s gone on between you, whatever it may be. If you want to embrace a life in the past, you need to live in the present. In the moment. C’mon! What is it you really want?”

The answer came easily. “I want Coll.”

“Because...?”

“Because I love him more than anything.”

Her sister smiled triumphantly. “There! That wasn’t so hard, was it?

No. But it wasn’t that simple either.

Ginny swirled the wine around her glass, staring into the burgundy depths as if they could provide all the answers.

“C’mon, Gin. If you love the guy, I promise you won’t have a single regret, no matter what time you’re in,” Brontë assured her.

It wasn’t her own regret Ginny was afraid of, as Coll assumed.

It was *his*.

“I’m afraid.”

And there it was. When it came down to it, that was the simple truth.

“Of course, you are.” Her sister lifted her glass as if to toast her viewpoint. “Anyone with a past has regrets and fears because of them. You can’t base your future on what happened with Luke. I’ve met him. He’s an ass. Is this one?”

Mid sip, Ginny’s nearly choked on her wine. She coughed, shaking her head emphatically. “No. He’s nothing like Luke.” She ignored the softly muttered ‘Thank God’ from her sibling and continued. “Coll’s proud of me. Not just proud of me, but proud to be with *me*. If that makes any sense.”

“You don’t need a man to make you feel good about yourself, Gin.” Brontë squeezed her hand. “You’re amazing as you are.”

Ginny waved the comment away. “That’s not what I meant. I’m



saying he...he makes me feel good about *me*. I see myself through his eyes and like what I see. You don't know what it was like. With Luke, I mean. I haven't liked myself in a long time because he made me feel unlikeable. With Coll, I'm..."

"Yes?"

"Enough." She tasted the word. "I'm enough."

"That's wonderful, Gin," her sister assured her softly. "I know how amazing it feels to know that someone loves you exactly as you are."

"He does."

*I swear I shall love ye well enough that ye'd have nae reason to regret.*

Well, that went both ways, didn't it? There was love enough—on both sides—to assure that there would never be a chance for regrets. Certainty bloomed in her heart and radiated out until its warmth bubbled up.

She let it burst out in a smile and reached out to hug her sister. "Thank you." She kissed Brontë's cheek with a laugh. "You have such a big heart. Tris is so lucky to have you."

"Yours is bigger." Brontë squeezed her hard. "Coll won't know what to do with it all."

"I bet he will."

They broke apart as front door slammed and Mike Hughes came into the living room.

"Dad? What are you doing here?" Brontë asked before she could.

Ginny set her glass aside and jumped up to hug him. She only got a few steps before she saw Luke come in behind him. Her gaze jumped between him and her father.

"What is this?"

"Hi, sweetie. I'm glad you're here. Luke said he hadn't been able to find you."

Mike reached for her but Ginny jerked away. "What the fuck is this?"

He smiled, managing to look contrite. "Now, sweetie."

The confusion clouding her mind cleared. Suddenly everything was crystal clear. She turned on her heel, snatched up her wine glass, and bolted for the kitchen. Tossing back the remainder of the glass, she'd poured another before her father joined her. Ginny didn't wait for him to speak but whirled around with all the fury tearing at her heart. "You came here to defend *him*?"

"No, of course not," he insisted. "I'm here for you. Whatever you need."

She laughed into the glass and nearly choked on the wine. "You're here to support me now? You know I could have used a little of that support over the past year, but you know who you supported instead?" Her arm shot out to point toward the living room. "The

superstar.”

“Luke’s been through hell, too. Give him a chance, sweetie.”

That humorless laugh bubbled up again. “Still you defend him! Unbelievable. But then, I’ve always known whose side you’re on.” The truth hit her, turning her stomach. Her voice dropped flat. “You’re the one who’s been telling him where I am?”

“Sweetie.”

His tone said everything.

Betrayal unlike any she’d ever known tore through her. After everything she’d been through since the divorce—the incessant phone calls, threatening texts, random drive-bys that had driven her out of an entire country...He’d known how anxious it had made her. Hell, how scared she was by Luke’s ability to find her. Always find her.

Her father had been behind it all along.

Her stomach churned.

“You’ve given him my new phone number, my addresses.” She swallowed the lump in her throat before it turned into a sob but couldn’t fight the tears burning her eyes. “All this time. Why?”

Mike held his arms wide as if she’d welcome his embrace. “I only want you to be happy.”

Ginny shook her head. “You don’t know what makes me happy, Dad. You don’t *ask* what makes me happy. You see what made *you* happy and proud and gave you something to brag about and that’s it.”

He had the gall to look disappointed in her. In her! Enough. This was the last time she was going to let her father make her feel in the wrong. Like dirt. She wasn’t the bad person here. She wasn’t wrong to want something more. Something better. Something unconditional.

And perfect.

She set the glass down with a deep breath. “I’ve got to go. Don’t you dare follow me.”

He did anyway, trailing her out of the room. Past Brontë and Luke.

“Ginny, what’s wrong?” Brontë cried after her.

“I’ve got to go.”

“You can’t keep running away from your problems,” her father called after her when she snatched up her backpack and ran out the door.

“I’m not running from them,” she shouted over her shoulder. Then added to herself. “I’m running toward something much, much better.”

“Ginny! Wait! Don’t run off.” Her sister dashed from the house, catching her arm before she reached the curb. “You don’t need to leave, Gin. They can.”

Ginny shook her head. “This family is broken. I was so worried about what everyone would feel if I left, but we aren’t really even a

family anymore, are we? Not since Dad destroyed it. Mom isn't the same person. It's as if by pretending we never happened, she can pretend Dad never happened. Jane acts like she needs no one but herself."

"I love you."

Her heart clenched at the sincere declaration. Ginny wrapped her arms around her sister and hugged her hard. "I know, and I love you too. But, let's face it, we only see each other like twice a year and we still can, seeing as you hold that power literally in the palm of your hand." She lifted her head, knowing for maybe the first time in her life what the right thing was without having to dwell on it.

At the curb, Tris was helping Granny from her car. Involuntarily, Brontë's expression softened and Ginny completely understood, for the first time, why.

"I'm so glad for you and Tris," Ginny said. "Now I get it, because I've found something special, too. Something wonderful. I was a fool not to acknowledge right from the start that I've found someone worth fighting for. A cause worth fighting for. And someone who will always fight for me first. I've been so blind not to see it. Coll's happy just to be with me. Happy to be there just holding my hand."

And she was happy to let him hold it.

"For you, finding Tris may have been orchestrated, but I prefer to think of mine as Fate. And it's calling."

Brontë sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Then I'm glad you're answering. I'll come see you."

If she was going to commit, she might as well jump with both feet. "Actually, can you give me a ride and drop me off? I want to make sure I give you your device back. Sorry I can't do the same with the money and your dress."

"Keep it," she insisted. "I'll get Donell to give me another."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't think I'll need it."

Her sister's lips trembled before smiles wreathed her face. "You should see yourself right now. I've never seen you look so sure of yourself. So serene. I'm so happy for you."

"Ginny, get back here." It wasn't her father who shouted the command. It was Luke.

She bit back a scream. One of the happiest moments of her life and he was here to ruin it. As he'd ruined so many others. She was so over this.

He caught her arm—hard—and spun her around. "Where do you think you're going?"

There was only one place she wanted to be.

She jerked her arm out of his grasp. "Home."

"Bout time," Luke sneered. "You could have saved me the trouble

of the past six months.”

“Leave her alone, you asshole!” Brontë smacked him on his other arm.

“I’m not going anywhere with you, Luke. I’m going home. My real home.”

To Coll.

For all of her overthinking and analysis, she’d never understood what had truly been holding her back until now. At least consciously. Subconsciously, that sticking point had been what drove her to visit Hugh. Family. Obligation. Hurting those she loved by disappearing...

She’d been afraid that she would miss her family so much that even the depth of what she felt in her heart for Coll couldn’t compete. That regrets would fester until guilt and dissatisfaction ended up causing him more hurt than she’d already brought him.

For the first time she understood that she couldn’t prioritize the feelings of those who didn’t prioritize her in return.

She turned her back on Luke. On her past.

Arms, strong as a vise, wrapped around her from behind. “I’m not done with you, Gin.”

Resolve flowed through Ginny. “Maybe not, but I’m done with you.”

She threw back her head and was promptly released as Luke howled in pain. Before he could reach for her again, Tris, his face black with rage, was there to hold him back.

“Run all you like, Gin,” Luke shouted after her. “There ain’t nowhere you can go that I can’t find you.”

“Wanna bet?”

Ginny tossed the dare back at him with none of the anger she’d expected to harbor. She was done with that. Done with the past.

Done pondering, dwelling, and regretting.

From now on, she would only look forward.

Ginny paused to kiss her Granny’s cheek and hug her tight taking in the scent of roses that always reminded her of her grandmother. This was goodbye. Maybe forever. “Thank you for everything, Granny. I love you.”

“I love you too, dear.” She returned the embrace. “My goodness. What is it?”

“Ginny’s running away to live in the past with the love of her life, Granny!”

“Brontë!” Ginny protested. Her sister was going to give their grandmother a coronary!

“Oh!” Violet patted her cheek. “How wonderful, dear! Bring him to dinner Sunday, will you?”

Brontë caught Ginny’s arm and steered her toward the car with a

grin. "I've found it best to be honest with Granny. She never believes a word of it anyway."

The driver's side door swung open and Donell climbed out. Ginny's step hitched. "What are you doing here?"

Donell nodded past her to where Luke fought in vain against Tris's tight hold. "Wouldnae miss a front row seat to that. Well done, lassie."

"That's it? Well done?" She'd thought he'd finally come to take her choice away from her. One she wouldn't appreciate. "Nothing more about the mistakes I've made?"

He shrugged. "As I've said, sometimes mistakes happen for a reason."

"Just so that there are no more of them..." She held out his time travel device, urging him to take it.

With a shake of his head, he closed her fingers around it. "Keep it, and take these as well."

Ginny looked down at the set of keys he offered. "What are these for?"

"A rowhouse on the bank of the River Ness in Inverness, wi' close neighbors and friends both past and present I gather ye've become quite fond of," he said. "A place where ye can be home in any time."

"Thank you." Touched by the unexpected, yet generous and thoughtful gesture, Ginny embraced Donell then pulled away with a smile. "I already have a home, but it will be nice to have a place to live."

## Chapter 47

*Nunton, Isle of Benbecula, Scotland*  
*Approximately one second after Coll knocked on the door*  
*June 1746*

“Coll!”

Coll jumped when Ginny grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the door. “What are ye doing? I thought ye were going to visit yer family.”

“I did.” She grinned at him then waved dismissively at Angus, the steward at Nunton, when he opened the door with a scowl. “Never mind. Go about your business.”

Catching Coll’s hand, she tugged him in her wake around the manor back the way they’d come moments before. Her russet hair bounced in the sunlight. Even from feet away, he caught the fresh floral scent. Her smile and the blush on her cheeks bespoke a buoyancy that hadn’t been there moments before. Whatever had happened, it left her in a state he wasn’t certain he’d seen before.

He pulled her to a stop, unable to stifle the answering smile that played on his lips. He’d admitted he’d been worried when she said she wanted to go home for a visit. However brief, he’d feared it might be the last he saw of her. His heart had begun to sink before he raised a hand to knock on the door. Now...

Och, her eyes danced with the same joy and anticipation that had danced through his heart since they swam in Loch Nan Uamh so many months ago.

Her warm fingers caressed his jaw then slid into his hair. “I’ve missed you.”

Though it had been barely a minute, he knew precisely how she felt. “I’ve missed ye, too, *mo ghrá*.”

She was on her toes as he bent his head. Her lips were soft and eager as they parted with a sigh beneath his. His heart jolted as if it had been a sennight since he kissed her instead of minutes. Wrapping his arms around her, he molded her curves against him and deepened the kiss. Tasting her, so sweet and tempting. Her heady scent lifted on the breeze off the ocean and swirled around them until he was lost.

Thoroughly. Happily.

In her. With her.

He was so lost, in fact, it took a full minute for the truth of the

situation to sink in. Lifting his head, he stared down into her bright eyes. "Ye're staying."

"Always," she promised. "Forever, if you'll have me."

"Och, just try to leave my sight again," he teased. "I could barely stand the heartache once."

"Three times was enough for me." Ginny beamed up at him. "I'm not going anywhere. And to be clear, because I'm pretty sure I didn't mention it before—I love you, Coll. So much I couldn't even recognize it for what it was. I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner."

Something buoyant filled his heart. He wasn't certain what to call it as he'd never felt anything like it before. "Ye see it now."

"I do."

"Say it again."

Stroking his cheek, she met his eyes and repeated with absolute sincerity. "I love you. I love that you're strong, that you have conviction. That you care so much about your people and the world around you. That you'll fight with me and for me. You are everything home is supposed to be. Now you are mine."

Coll's heart pounded in his chest and he silently sent a prayer of thanks heavenward for giving him so much. This was more than he deserved. Unable to help himself, he kissed her again. Hard, until she stayed in his arms.

Ginny was here. His heart had long been hers and now he had hers in turn. Nothing else mattered.

Except.

"Prince Charlie is well?"

"It all turned out as it should. Now shut up and kiss me some more."

With a chuckle he complied, only to be interrupted a moment later by the distinct sound of a throat clearing. Coll looked up to find a pretty brunette grinning at him. Her distinctive eye color told him she bore some relation to Ginny.

"Ye maun be Brontë."

"Yes, hello. Sorry to interrupt but things were getting a little...um, involved there, and you may have forgotten you have an audience."

Beyond her he saw the boatful of oarsmen awaiting him and the broad grins upon all their faces. An unusual warmth crept into his cheeks and he pulled himself a few inches away from Ginny but kept an arm around her waist. "I should thank you."

"Don't!" She waved her hand dismissively. "I wanted to make sure my sister was going to be in good hands before I left her here. And I got my answer."

"What do ye mean, leave her here?" he protested. "Ye dinnae take that gadget away, did ye? My lass should always have options. I'll do

naught to create a prison of regrets from which she cannae escape.”

“Life with you will never be a prison. It will be my world,” Ginny assured him with a radiant smile. “Without a single regret.”

Her warmth infused him. “Then keep it so I can share yer world wi’ ye.”

“That I can do.”

Contentment washed over him and Coll pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead, then shifted his attention to the man beside Brontë. “Ye maun be Tris, then.”

The man smiled affably and they shook hands. “Aye. It is my pleasure to meet my future brother-in-law. I hope you dinnae mind if we’re frequent visitors? Brontë will want to see her sister often.”

“I would enjoy that.” Coll cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Though I maun confess I dinnae even ken where we will live as yet.”

Ginny wrapped her arms around him and hugged him, smiling up at him. “I know a place. And a few more we can visit, too.”

Curiosity struck. “Aye?”

“You can add my friend Aila to the list,” Brontë told them. “She’ll be here in about two years and will be happy to have a friend close by.”

Coll got the feeling it wasn’t proximity she referred to. “We will be glad for her friendship.”

“And her future husband’s. Finn will be glad to have someone around who truly appreciates his situation.”

And what a situation it was! One as unique and fascinating as Ginny herself. He smiled down at his love. Life with her would keep him on his toes.

She returned the gesture and squeezed his hand. “It doesn’t matter where we are. Together we will always be home.”

“Aye,” he said, smiling. A wave of contentment washed over him. Whatever else, they always had a home with each other. Forgetting their audience, he kissed her again with the promise on his lips, then looked down at her with a frown.

“What do ye mean, *three* times?”



The **Something About a Highlander** series  
will continue with

# *The* HEART *of a* SCOT

Something about a  
HIGHLANDER  
BOOK FOUR

## Author's Note

Thank you for reading *A Scot Worth Having*. It is something of a sidebar from the overall series arc of Auld Donell's interference, but I felt it would be a fun subject to broach. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

While success for me personally is measured in bringing you joy, a moment of emotion, and escape from the hectic thing that is life, it is also measured by the quality and quantity of the reviews my books receive. They don't just help other readers decide to spend their time and money on a book, they help me, too. I read each review that is posted. I take what you say to heart and use it to improve and grow.

If you would take a few minutes of your time to leave a review, I'd be grateful.

I hope you've enjoyed the flashbacks to Hugh and Claire's story and a peek into Keir and Al's, as well. I have loved revisiting the characters I created so long ago!

And the landscape of Scotland, too.

My castle of Dunchleach is based on Dunvegan Castle. When I visited Scotland and the Isle of Skye, I fell in love with the beauty and history there. I took close to 1,000 pictures there, most of the castle and its gorgeous gardens. Many of them inspired this story. Though not an actual stop on Prince Charlie's route to freedom, the castle does exhibit artifacts from the time including a coat reputed to having belonged to the prince, weaponry, bagpipes, and the remains of a glass bow engraved with the inscription: Donald MacLeod of Galtrigill in the Isle of Skye. The Faithful Palinuris, Act. 69 Anno 1747. Prince Charlie gifted it to my "Auld MacLeod" in thanks for rowing him about during his escape. Palinuris was the boatman who ferried people across the River Styx in Roman mythology.

It's that kind of history that feeds my imagination and brings these stories to life. I'll be honest, I purged dozens of pages from this book that were filled with long, flowery descriptions of the Highlands, South Uist, and the Isle of Skye. I've been many places in the world, but when it all comes down to it, there is no other place that, for me, overflows with such an abundance of untamed beauty and palpable history. Standing on the moor where the battle of Culloden was fought, I felt as Ginny did, overcome by the sadness and loss. It truly inspires me and excited me to learn more about the history of the places I've been.

So much to research!

This book has been a time-consuming one. I've done more research into the details of Bonny Prince Charlie's escape in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden than I ever have before because I wanted to get the history right. I hadn't realized how difficult that would be. While all accounts were extrapolated from journals and letters of the time, I found, as Ginny did, while there were many theories, there was no consensus on the route the prince took. Most sum it up with a simple "he escaped on a French ship." It came as something of a surprise to discover that it took five months for that to happen.

While his departure point from the Outer Hebrides is unknown, their landing point on Skye was more precise thanks to that pivotal moment when Flora MacDonald made her appearance. She was an unlikely ally. Both her father, Hugh MacDonald of Amandale, and her fiancé, Allan MacDonald, were part of the Hanoverian army supporting King George II. As I mentioned in the story, her stepfather was a sympathizer even if her fiancé was not. It was with his permission and even encouragement that a reluctant Flora aided the prince. The song "O'er the Sea to Skye" is said to have originated at their crossing of The Minch, where Flora slept with her head in Prince Charlie's lap. They landed near Kilmuir at what is today called Rudha Phrionnsa (Prince's Point). Their escape is awash in folklore, romanticized by the notion that the pair had a brief but passionate affair ending with a rumor that the prince gifted her with a locket containing his portrait and a lock of his hair when they parted.

My story ends midway through his endeavors. From Kilmuir, he would leave from Raasay on the Isle of Skye by boat and make his way back to the mainland, even stopping once again in Arisaig before he finally made his way back to France. It is amazing to me that despite a bounty of £30,000 on his head, *no one* ever betrayed his location. If you're interested in reading more, the best account of the battle and its aftermath that I could find is *Bonnie Prince Charlie: Charles Edward Stuart* by Frank McLynn.

My supporting characters are based upon the Seven Men of Moidart, the seven followers of the prince who landed with him in July of 1745 to begin their campaign. In addition to John O'Sullivan who was an Irish officer in the French army before becoming Prince Charlie's quartermaster, there were other Irishmen: Rev. George Kelly, Sir John MacDonnell, Sir Thomas Sheridan. Francis Strickland was an Englishman. Only William Murray, Marquis of Tullibardine, and Aeneas MacDonald, younger brother of the Laird of Kinlochmoidart, were Scotsmen. The marquis died in captivity and Strickland at Carlisle. The Irishmen except MacDonnell, who surrendered as a

prisoner of war, all escaped back to France while Aeneas MacDonald was banished. These men are commemorated with a cairn and a stand of seven beech trees for their faithful service.

Such that it was. I have written O'Sullivan as the sycophant many of the reference books believed him to be. He reputedly fawned over the prince, stoked the prince's suspicious nature, and encouraged him to believe that the Scots were ready to betray him. Because of those incidents of placing the blame on others, Prince Charlie is often portrayed as a weak leader and the primary reason for the rebellion's failure. By other accounts, he was often misled or under informed. All agreed that he proved himself under the horrible conditions of his retreat as a hardy man and an excellent shot.

Of late, conclusions regarding his leadership have begun to change to reflect new research on the subject. Though prone to bouts of anxiety and depression (let's face it, under the same circumstances, not many of us would do better!) he was often mentioned as being kind and generous to those he met. To my mind, he was young and inexperienced, but I chose to portray him in that manner in the end, only because he rarely was in history books. People grow and learn from their mistakes. I like to think he did, too.

My clan MacLeod in this book is one of fiction. The true chieftain of the clan at the time was Norman MacLeod. In Gaelic, Tormond. Or as he was known in history, *Tormond an Droch* Dhuine, or Norman the Wicked Man. Basically he was a scoundrel. As a young man he was something of a spendthrift, working his way through £60,000 of his inheritance and leaving a debt of £50,000 more upon his death resulting in the forfeiture of clan lands at Harris and Glenelg. He was also involved in '*soitheach nan daoine*' (the ship of the people) in 1739, a plan intended to sell inhabitants of the Isle of Skye into indentured servitude in the American Colonies. He was rarely at Dunvegan and left his wife Janet to starve in the dungeon of Dunvegan. He was a philanderer to boot. While my Tormond MacLeod is a bit of a dick, he isn't a complete ass, so changes needed to be made on that score. He'd make an excellent primary villain in another story, though.

In fiction here and real life, however, he did reverse course on his former loyalties to support George II from the time Prince Charlie landed in Scotland. Though he did not take part in Culloden, he did have his men fight in the battles leading up to it and in the aftermath of the battle, followed the Duke of Cumberland's orders to raid the land of the MacLeods of Raasay who had supported the cause.

You can find out more about my inspirations and history on Scotland on my Pinterest board for *A Scot Worth Having* at <https://www.pinterest.com/angelinefortin1/a-scot-worth-having/>

I hope you're looking forward to the next installment in the

*Something About a Highlander* series! *The Heart of a Scot* will be something out of the traditional highlander tale, but about a subject that I've always wanted to write about. I hope you'll enjoy it.

Thank you again for reading. Please know how much I appreciate you all!

All the best,

***Angeline***

## Also by Angeline Fortin

The Something About a Highlander Series:

*A Scot to Remember*

*A Good Scot is Hard to Find*

Regency Historical Romance

*Once Again, My Love ~ A Tale of Pride & Penitence*

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*Nothing But Time*

*My Heart's in the Highlands*

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*In The Holiday Spirit in Spirits of the Season* anthology

## About the Author

Angeline Fortin, author of historical and time-travel romance, enchants her readers with fun, sexy and often touching tales of romance.

Her time travel romance novel, *Taken*, was awarded the Virginia Romance Writers 2015 Holt Medallion Award for Paranormal Romance.

With a degree in U.S. History from UNLV and having previously worked as a historical interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg, Angeline brings her love of history and Great Britain to the forefront in settings such as Victorian London and Edinburgh.

As a former military wife, Angeline has lived from west to the east, in the north and in the south and uses those experiences along with memories of her favorite places to tie into her time travel novels as well.

Angeline is a native Minnesotan who lives with her husband and four dogs. She is a wine enthusiast, DIY addict (much to her husband's chagrin) and sports fanatic who faithfully cheers for the Twins and Vikings through their occasional highs and average lows.

Most of all she loves what she does every day — writing.

You can check out her website <http://www.angelinefortin.com> for summaries of all her books and companion information, and to sign up for her newsletter for news about upcoming releases. You can also contact her at <mailto:fortin.angeline@gmail.com>.

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